

# **Birchgrove**

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## Arrival

The sun hung low in the western sky, its orange glow soaking the hills and trees in honeyed light as the young dwarf brought his donkey to a slow stop beside a wide, green field. The grass rolled gently under the wind, dotted with clusters of wildflowers and the occasional low stump or stone, remnants of a forest that once stretched further than it did now. To the east, dense trees crowded together with thick trunks and shadowy undergrowth—an old forest, the kind that whispered when you weren't listening. A river, clear and steady, curled its way along the northern edge of the field, its waters catching the light like silver ribbons.

The dwarf slid down from the saddle with a grunt, patting the donkey's neck affectionately before moving to unstrap his pack. He was short and broad, shoulders thick from work, with hands like carved stone and arms dappled with the scars of hard labor. His beard, long and black with a few tangled bits of twine and forest debris, hung to the middle of his chest, damp with sweat and dust from the road.



“Aye,” he muttered, surveying the land with a hand above his brow, “this’ll do. Good soil by the smell, trees for timber, water close by... what more does a dwarf need?”

He began to unpack slowly, careful with his tools. The hammer came out first, wrapped in oiled cloth. Then the planer, the saw, the coiled rope, the axe with its well-worn handle. A leather pouch of nails jingled as he set it down. He unfastened the blanket roll and pulled out a small tent, simple but sturdy. As he drove stakes into the ground with measured strikes of a stone, he kept up a steady murmur.

“Da always said, ‘Start with the ground, boy. Strong ground makes strong homes.’ This looks like strong ground to me. Would’ve liked it here, Da would. Ma too, maybe. Less smoke, less screaming.”

His voice faltered for a moment, but he cleared his throat and went on, brushing thoughts aside like flies. He finished with the tent and set up a small circle of stones for a fire. With practiced ease, he struck the flint, coaxing sparks into a nest of dry moss and twigs. The flame took quickly, casting flickers across his face as twilight deepened.

From a cloth bundle, he pulled a hunk of bread, a wedge of sharp, firm cheese, and a tin flask of ale that smelled faintly of apples and barley. He sat cross-legged beside the fire, chewing slowly, his eyes fixed on the trees ahead.

“Reckon I’ll start with the frame in the mornin’,” he said aloud, wiping crumbs from his beard. “Four walls and a roof. Nothin’ fancy till I’ve got more time. But it’ll be mine. A dwarf needs a roof, same as a mountain needs stone.”

He stood and walked to the river, splashing cold water on his face and scrubbing at the dust and sweat of travel. The water darkened his beard, made his skin flush from the chill. He sighed, straightening up, staring into the water a moment.

“Thornwood’s gone,” he said, softly. “But I ain’t. Not yet.”

Back at the tent, he ducked inside, laying the blanket down on the grass. The fire outside crackled softly. Crickets chirped. Somewhere in the woods, an owl called once. As he settled into his bedroll, wrapping his cloak tighter, he whispered to no one, “Tomorrow, I build.”

Then silence, broken only by the river and the wind through the grass, and the steady breath of a dwarf who had survived, and now, would begin again.

Morning came with a low mist curling off the river and drifting across the field in thin tendrils. Gili stirred beneath his blanket, blinking blearily at the dim light filtering through the tent canvas. With a grunt, he rolled over and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The mild air blew at his cheeks and he was already reaching for his boots and axe with the eagerness of a man set on a day’s hard work.

He stoked the fire back to life with a few gentle puffs and a handful of dry twigs, gnawed on a crust of bread, and took a pull of river water from his flask. Then, without wasting more time, he grabbed his axe and set off toward the forest. The donkey, still tethered lazily nearby, gave a half-hearted bray but Gili only chuckled.

“Aye, ye’ll have yer work soon enough, lad. Rest while ye can,” he said over his shoulder.

Within the green gloom of the forest, Gili picked his trees carefully. Not too young, not too old—straight and sturdy was what he needed. He swung the axe with steady, practiced strokes, the blade biting deep into the trunks. Woodchips flew with every strike, the rhythmic thudding echoing between the trees. After each tree fell, he set to trimming off the branches, humming an old dwarven working song under his breath.

"Swing and fall, timber tall, build me walls both wide and small... by hammer's ring and chisel's call, I'll raise a home before the fall..."

The hours slipped by unnoticed, save for the growing pile of felled logs stripped clean and ready. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Gili made his way back to camp and fetched the donkey, speaking to it in that low, soothing tone all his folk reserved for animals.

"Come on, old beastie. Ye're not just here for the bread and apples, eh?"

He looped thick rope around the first log and tied it to the donkey's harness with careful knots. Together, they trudged back to the field. The mule strained against the weight, hooves digging into the earth, but Gili encouraged him with soft murmurs and a firm hand.

One log at a time they moved. Seven trips in all, and by the end Gili's arms burned and his shirt clung to him, soaked through. Still, he was grinning as he surveyed the tidy row of logs laid out near the tent.

"Seven stout logs for seven stout walls... or four stout walls and a roof, maybe," he chuckled, setting down his rope.

Without wasting breath, he picked the four straightest logs and dragged them into position, arranging them in a rough square. Hammer in one hand, nails clamped between his teeth, he knelt and set to work, driving the nails deep with heavy, sure blows.

"There we go... snug an' tight, just like Da taught me. None o' this fancy elven joinery nonsense... no offense."

Once the frame was sturdy enough to stand on its own, Gili turned to the remaining logs. With his axe he began carving shallow notches at each end, creating crude but effective saddle joints that would let the logs sit firmly atop one another. His strokes were measured, precise, the sort of work a man could lose himself in.

One by one, he stacked them, each log fitted snugly into the notch below. Slowly, steadily, the skeleton of his new home rose from the earth, a half-meter high when the sun had started its slow descent toward the horizon.

"Not much yet," he muttered, standing back with hands on hips, "but it'll keep the rain off me head someday."

Dusty and aching, he decided it was time to wash the day's grime from his skin. Stripping off his sweaty clothes, he padded barefoot to the river and dove in with a whoop as the icy water closed over him. He surfaced gasping, but laughing too, slapping water onto his face and beard.

Once he was clean and shivering on the bank, he tied a bit of bread to a hook and cast it into the river. The line went slack for nearly an hour, Gili passing the time by poking at the fire and sipping slow draughts of ale. At last, with a sharp tug, he hauled in a small, plump fish, silver and quick even on the line.

"Ha! There's dinner, sweet as any tavern stew," he said, gutting it quickly and roasting it over the flames. He ate with both hands, tearing into the flaky flesh, and washing it down with more ale until his belly was full and warmth crept back into his bones.

As night gathered thick around the little field, Gili crawled into his tent once more, muscles aching but heart content. Tomorrow would be another day of building—and he couldn't wait.

When dawn crept in again, Gili wasted no time. After a brief breakfast and a moment to stretch the soreness from his limbs, he set about constructing a rough ramp from earth and scrap wood, bracing it carefully with rocks to give it strength. It wasn't pretty, but it would let him roll or drag logs higher as he worked. He gave it an experimental stomp and nodded in satisfaction.

"Good enough for a dwarf, good enough for the gods," he grunted.

Back into the woods he went, swinging his axe with practiced determination. More trees fell to his blade, each one stripped and trimmed before being hauled, one by one, with the help of the tireless donkey. The clearing near the river filled slowly with logs, and the skeleton of the house grew higher, stronger, and more real with every passing hour. The air was filled with the sound of hammering, sawing, and the low, steady hum of a dwarf singing to the beat of his own dreams.

Days passed, and little by little, the shape of Gili's new life took form. The walls of the house now stood tall and stout, a proud shell of timber locked together with stubborn nails and stronger will. He ran his calloused hand along the rough logs, feeling the warmth of the sun on the wood, the strength beneath his fingers. It was time for the roof.

Gili set about the task with grim enthusiasm, sawing and chiseling long planks from the straightest logs he had. His axe sang as it trimmed the wood to shape, the chisel groaned as it smoothed the joints. By evening, his arms felt like lead, but a grin split his bearded face as he hammered the last of the day's planks down, securing them tight atop the frame.

"Won't be any rain gettin' through ye, not if I've a say in it," he muttered, wiping sweat from his brow with a grimy sleeve. The donkey stood nearby, munching lazily on a patch of wild grass, unbothered by the racket. Gili cast a glance at him and chuckled.

"Bet you're wonderin' why I bother, eh, lad? Coulda slept under the stars... but a roof's a roof, and a dwarf without a roof is just a beardless elf, that's what Da used to say."

The next morning, Gili trudged into the forest again, armed with a large sack slung over his shoulder. He spent the better part of the day gathering great mats of moss, thick and spongy, peeling them from rocks and fallen trees. It was messy work, hands green-stained and knees wet with forest dew, but by mid-afternoon he had a good load. Back at the house, he climbed up onto the roof with determined grunts and laid the moss over the wooden planks, tamping it down carefully to form a natural insulation against the rain and heat.

"There now," he said, sitting back and admiring the work, legs dangling off the edge. "Good enough for kings, and twice as fine for me."

With the roof finished, he turned his mind to the floor inside. He spent another day shaping more planks, the saw rasping through the wood like a whisper of effort and patience. His knees ached from all the stooping, but he whistled while he worked, an old tune from Thornwood that spoke of mountain halls and deep, secret places.

One by one, the floorboards went down, fitted tight and nailed into place until the dusty ground was hidden beneath smooth wood. When it was done, he carried his bedroll inside with a kind of reverence, packing up the old tent that had been his only shelter for weeks.

“Home,” he said, placing his hand against the doorway. “By stone and star, it’s home.”

He spent the evening much the way he had spent the first—diving into the river with a delighted yell, letting the cold water strip away the grime of the day. He fashioned another crude fishing line from cord and hook, baited it with a crumb of bread, and waited. In time, he caught a fat little fish, roasted it over the fire until the skin cracked and popped, and ate it down to the bones. His ale was gone now—he tipped the skin upside down and laughed as only a dwarf could laugh at his own bad planning—so he filled it with fresh river water, nodding approvingly at the cool, clean taste.

The climate here was forgiving. The days were long and warm, the nights soft with only the occasional cool breeze that hinted at colder months ahead. It suited Gili just fine; he was tired of winters so cruel they bit through even the thickest beard.

Lying on his new floor that night, staring up at the rough beams above him, Gili thought about what came next. The house was a start, but it needed more. A real bed, a table, shelves maybe... a chair, if he was feeling fancy.

The next morning, after a quick wash and a bite of cheese, he patted the donkey on the flank and slung the axe over his shoulder.

“Time to get to work again, old friend,” he said, leading the beast toward the forest. “No rest for builders or beasts. We’ll make it nice yet, you’ll see. Maybe even a pen for you, eh? Get you outta the weather... or at least somewhere to grumble.”

He chuckled to himself as he picked his trees, eyeing the wood not for walls now, but for the finer shapes hidden inside. The axe swung low and sure, the forest echoing with the song of new beginnings, and Gili hummed along, dreaming of chairs, tables, and a home that would be more than just walls and a roof—it would be a life.

Morning sunlight slipped through the cracks between the logs, spearing Gili’s eyelids and pulling him from a heavy, dreamless sleep. He blinked a few times, yawned loud enough to shake dust from the rafters, and stretched his arms wide. Today was another day of making this simple house into a true home. With a grunt and a grin, he rose, grabbed his axe and planer, and stepped outside into the fresh morning air.

He set to work right away, hauling a few of the leftover logs into place and sawing them into thinner planks. The saw rasped and whined under his steady hands, the rhythm so familiar now that he almost didn’t notice the hours slipping by.

“Planks, planks, and more planks,” he mumbled to himself. “A dwarf’s life ain’t just delvin’ and diggin’, no matter what the songs say. Sometimes it’s hammerin’ an’ sawin’ till your back gives out.”

Once he had a good pile of boards, he started on the bed. Four rough planks hammered together into a simple square frame, with a few more for legs to lift it off the ground. It wasn’t fancy, but it was sturdy—and that was all Gili cared about. He dragged it into a corner of the house, nodding in approval, then went out to gather armfuls of soft hay and thick moss from near the riverbank. Stuffing the makeshift mattress with care, he fluffed it up and patted it down.

“Better than sleepin’ on stones, eh?” he said, chuckling as he brushed bits of moss from his beard.

Next came a table. Gili sawed some planks shorter, hammered them together with thick nails, and fashioned a squat, square table that wobbled only a little when pressed. He followed it with a chair, more of a stool really, cobbled together from scraps.

"Not much for sittin', really. Dwarves do their best thinkin' standin' up... but maybe after a pint or three, a chair's a wise thing to have."

With a bit of leftover wood, he threw together a simple cabinet against one wall—just a box with shelves, really—and then fixed a few more planks onto the walls as shelves for his tools and supplies. By the time the stars began to prick the sky outside, Gili’s house finally looked like a home, rough and plain, but filled with the marks of his own two hands.

He collapsed onto the hay-stuffed bed with a satisfied groan and drifted off into deep sleep, the smell of wood and moss around him like a warm blanket.

The next morning he awoke with a new purpose. Fire. A hearth and a chimney were what he needed next if he was to live proper.

He spent the better part of the morning along the river, gathering smooth stones, the best ones he could find, heavy and rounded from years of water’s touch. He piled them into his old donkey’s pack, leading the beast back and forth more times than he could count. Then, he dug into the riverbank for clay, the good sticky kind that oozed between his fingers, perfect for binding stones together.

Inside the house, he laid a rough outline in stones against one wall. Carefully, he built it up, using clay to mortar the stones into a crude chimney that climbed up the wall, leaving a gap for the smoke to rise and vent outside. It took most of the day, sweat pouring off him in rivers, but by the time the sun was a red smear on the horizon, he was patting the last stone into place.

He knelt before the new hearth, struck his flint, and coaxed a flame to life. The fire caught quickly, sending a thin snake of smoke up through the chimney, not into the house. The warmth spread through the room, licking at the cold corners and filling the space with a golden glow.



“Ha!” Gili barked, rubbing his hands together. “Warm toes and hot stew... not bad for a lad with nothin' but a pack and a mule.”

With his belly rumbling, he slung his fishing line over his shoulder and trudged to the riverbank. The water gleamed in the fading light, cool and inviting. He tossed his line in and sat back on a stone, waiting with the patience only hunger could teach.

As he waited, he plucked a few berries from nearby bushes, popping a few into his mouth, savoring the tart sweetness. He gathered more into a pouch tied at his belt.

“A good haul today... fish, berries, a fire, and a roof. Aye, Gili, lad, you're doin' just fine,” he muttered to himself with a rare smile.

When he finally felt the tug on his line, he hauled in a fat fish, its scales flashing silver in the twilight. Back at the house, he gutted and cleaned it quickly, skewered it on a stick, and roasted it over the fresh hearth fire. The smell filled the house, rich and savory, and Gili ate until he was full, licking the grease from his fingers and leaning back in his new chair with a satisfied groan.

Tomorrow would bring more work, more carving, more shaping—but tonight, Gili rested, the warm fire cracking beside him, the river singing softly beyond the walls of his home.

Gili woke early, stomach grumbling, throat dry and tired of the plainness of river water. He sat at the table he'd built, drumming thick fingers against the wood, eyes drifting toward the bucket of fresh water he'd hauled the day before. What he wanted was something stronger. Something that warmed the belly and brought a song to the lips. With a decisive grunt, he pushed away from the table and grabbed his saw.

He set to work outside, sawing some planks into shorter strips, hammering them into rough staves. Slowly, carefully, he bent them inward, hammering them together to form the round, stubby shape of a bucket. It wasn't the finest cooper's work, but it would hold. By noon, he had made two such buckets, both lined inside with clay. He smoothed the clay carefully with his fingers, whispering old words under his breath for good luck.

"Seal it up tight, keep the spirit in and the rot out," he said, nodding with satisfaction as he set them near the fire to dry.

The next day, when the clay was hardened smooth, he filled one bucket with clear river water and set it by the door for drinking and washing. The other, he carried deep into the woods, where the berry bushes grew heavy with dark, juicy fruit. He picked until his hands were stained purple, plucking berries by the handful until the bucket was full. Back at home, he poured water over the berries until they floated at the brim.

"There ye go," he said, giving the mixture a gentle stir with a stick. "Sleep now, little brew. Dream me somethin' sweet."

He tucked the bucket into a cool corner of the house and left it to work its slow magic, imagining the day he'd sit by the fire with a skin full of his own berry wine.

Not yet satisfied, Gili's mind wandered to longer plans. Wine was well and good, but a dwarf needed bread in his belly too. After a quick meal, he wandered the fields, scanning the waving grasses and low shrubs. It wasn't long before he found what he was looking for—wild barley, growing in scattered patches along the river's rich edge. He knelt, examining the seeds with a knowing eye, and began gathering them carefully into a pouch.

"Barley'll see me through lean times. Maybe even a bit o' beer, if the gods are smilin'," he muttered as he worked.

Back home, he sat by the fire with his tools, thinking. If he was to plant a real field, he needed a plow. He found a thick, straight branch for the shaft and used stout planks to build a frame, hammering and tying it together with strips of leather and rope. At the bottom, he lashed a sharp, heavy rock—carefully selected from the river's edge—to serve as a crude blade.

When it was done, he stepped back and looked at it, hands on hips, brow furrowed.

"A bit rough... but so am I. It'll do."

The donkey, ever patient, looked up from its grazing with wary eyes as Gili approached with the plow.

"Don't look at me like that, old boy," Gili said, chuckling as he rigged a simple harness out of rope and wood. "Yer stronger than ye look. We'll tear up this land good and proper."

The first day was hard. The rock-blade cut the earth grudgingly, and the plow jolted and shuddered with every stubborn root and stone it struck. The donkey brayed and dug in its heels more than once, and Gili had to coax and curse in equal measure to keep the beast moving.

"Come on now! Think of the barley cakes! The winter stew! The ale, ye stubborn mule!" he hollered, sweat pouring down his face, arms straining.

Each day he rose with the sun, working long hours under its hot gaze, the field slowly giving way to lines of rough-turned earth. By the end of the week, the field was a patchwork of dark furrows, waiting and ready. His hands were blistered, his back a solid knot of pain, but when he looked over the land, pride swelled in his chest.

"Aye," he whispered, voice low and filled with wonder. "A new life, row by row."

With careful hands, he sowed the wild barley seeds, walking up and down the furrows with steady steps, scattering them to the soil like an offering. When he finished, he stood in the center of the field, hands on hips, and looked up at the open sky.

"Grow tall, little seeds," he said softly. "Grow strong. We'll make somethin' fine here, you and I."

Then, with a satisfied grunt and the last of his strength, he trudged back to his little house, the scent of fermenting berries and fresh-turned earth filling the warm summer air.

Gili woke to the scent of warm earth and fresh clay still lingering in the corners of his house. The morning light streamed through the gaps in the wooden shutters, painting golden lines across the floorboards. He sat up slowly, scratching his beard and yawning.

“Time to see what the forest keeps in its pockets,” he murmured, pulling on his boots and slinging his small shovel over his back.

With a chunk of bread in hand and a bit of cheese tucked into his pouch, he set off into the woods and the fields beyond, eyes scanning the undergrowth and the edges of glades where sunlight reached down to kiss the soil. He wasn't looking for timber today, but fruit—something sweet to break the salt and smoke of fish, something to grow.

It wasn't long before he spotted a familiar shape: a slender sapling with soft green leaves and a promising scent. Apple. He grinned, kneeling beside it and easing the shovel into the soil.

“That's the stuff. You'll be sweeter than river water come summer.”

He dug carefully, trying not to disturb the roots too much. One by one, over the course of a few hours, he found six more: a wild cherry sapling with dusky bark, a tart plum, two sour pears, and a hardy thornfruit tree with small, tough red berries good for drying. Each was wrapped in damp moss and slung gently over the mule's back.



By midday he was back behind his house, the sun hot on his neck as he picked a soft, loamy patch of soil and spaced the saplings out in a neat row. One after another, he dug the holes deep and firm, setting the young trees in place and patting the earth around them with care.

“There now,” he said, standing with hands on his hips, sweat running down his face. “Grow tall, little ones. We’ll eat like mountain lords in a few years.”

But his hands weren’t made for rest. The trees were planted, yes, but his mind turned to other needs—sharper needs. Meat was scarce and fish were fine, but there might come a day when something walked through the woods that he’d rather eat than just admire.

He grabbed his axe and made for the birch stands he’d seen a few days prior. It took him some walking, but he found one—tall and clean, not too thick, with just the right bend to it. He chopped it down with practiced rhythm, stripped the branches and bark, and shouldered it back home, already measuring its shape in his mind.

Back at his bench, he trimmed the stave and bent it gently, testing the spring in the wood. It had good give. With care, he strung a cord—braided tightly from old rope and some sinew he’d dried earlier. The bow took shape in his hands slowly, with the patience of a builder.

“Not a weapon fit for war,” he said, pulling the string and watching it sing, “but enough to fetch a rabbit... or scare off anything bigger than me.”

He fashioned arrows from smaller branches, shaved straight and tipped with sharp, fire-hardened points. The fletching was crude—just split sticks for now—but they’d fly, and that was enough.

Later that day, feeling the itch for more than ranged work, he took another length of birch and carved a spear from it—tall, thick, and ending in a sharp point hardened in the fire and smoothed with stone. He spun it in his hand and grinned.

“Let’s hope I don’t have to use you, but I reckon I’ll sleep better knowin’ you’re nearby.”

Before night came, he went again to the river, casting his line and waiting quietly. The water sang its same quiet tune, and soon enough he pulled in a wriggling fish, its silver sides flashing in the fading light. It cooked quick over the hearth, and he ate in silence, content. The day had been good.

The next morning, Gili stepped out of his house, stretched his arms wide, and took a deep breath of warm, sweet-smelling air. A bench, he thought. A place to sit and look at all he’d done. He gathered more planks, sawed them to size, and hammered them together with sturdy legs and a wide seat. It was rough, like everything else he’d made, but steady as a mountain. He set it just outside the front door, under the shade of the eaves, and sat on it for a long moment, admiring his fields, the forest, the slow curve of the river.

“Not bad,” he said softly. “Not bad at all.”

The air carried the faintest smell of something familiar, earthy and a little sweet. Pipeweed. He stood, curious, and set off into the meadows near the edge of the forest. His eyes scanned the wild grasses until he found it—thick, leafy stalks with the scent of sun-dried soil and soft spice. Pipeweed, wild and strong. He picked carefully, pulling whole stems and bunches, gathering them into a sling.

Back home, he spread the leaves out on a flat board in the sun, weighed down at the corners so the wind wouldn't steal them.

"Dry nice for me," he said, wagging a finger at the bundle. "I've earned a pipe after all this."

He walked to the river again, dug for fine clay, and returned with a fat lump tucked under his arm. Sitting on his bench, he shaped it with slow fingers, carving and hollowing until a small clay pipe emerged—short and squat with a thick stem and a deep bowl.

"A proper dwarf's pipe," he murmured with satisfaction, setting it in the sun beside the drying leaves. "Tomorrow, we'll have a smoke."

He sat back then, tired but full of quiet pride, letting the sounds of the wild carry the evening in. Behind him, his house stood solid and warm. Before him, the field waited with promise. And in his heart, a sense of peace deeper than the river.

The morning air was crisp and sweet, filled with the scent of sun-warmed grass and river mist. Gili rose early, feeling the old hunger of his ancestors stirring in his blood—a call for the hunt. He checked the bow carefully, tightening the cord with a grunt of satisfaction, and counted the arrows he had fletched. Six good shots. Not much, but enough if his aim was true. He slung the spear over his back as well, feeling the weight of it solid against his shoulder.

"Best be ready for trouble," he muttered, pulling on his boots and stepping out into the waking woods.

Hours passed under the green canopy. Gili moved with care, his stout frame weaving between trees and brush as silent as the morning mist. Birds sang above him, the river whispered somewhere off to the east, and his keen eyes scanned every shadow, every flicker of movement.

Then, near a muddy clearing, he spotted it—a wild boar, thick and muscled, its black bristles shining in the patches of light. The beast was drinking from a shallow puddle, snorting softly, utterly unaware of the danger creeping closer.

Gili crouched low, pulled an arrow from his quiver, and nocked it to the string. He took a slow, steady breath, aimed at the boar's head, and let fly. The arrow shot through the air with a deadly hiss, striking the beast square above the eye.

But the boar did not fall. Instead, with a deafening squeal of rage, it jerked upright, blood streaming down its face, and turned its furious eyes toward Gili.

"Stone and stars..." Gili hissed, scrambling back and drawing his spear just as the beast charged.

The boar hit him like a battering ram, sending him sprawling into the dirt. Pain flared sharp and bright as the tusk tore into his leg, and Gili gritted his teeth to keep from screaming. He lashed out with the spear, but the first thrust missed, scraping against the beast's shoulder. The boar spun and charged again, foam flying from its tusks, squealing like a thing possessed.

Another jab—missed. Another—missed again. Gili stumbled, blood running down his leg, sweat stinging his eyes.



"Come on then, you devil," he snarled, planting his boots in the mud, gripping the spear with both hands.

The boar came for him one final time, head low, tusks gleaming. Gili knelt, bracing the spear before him, angling it toward the beast's chest. The boar ran full into it with all its maddened strength. The sharpened birch point drove deep into the creature's heart, snapping the shaft in two with the force of the charge. The boar let out one last shriek and collapsed at Gili's feet, the light going out of its wild eyes.

For a long moment, Gili just knelt there, panting, heart hammering so loud he could hardly hear the forest around him. Then he pushed himself up, favoring his wounded leg, and grabbed the beast by the legs.

"By the stones below, you were a stubborn one," he muttered, hoisting the dead weight onto his shoulders. The boar was heavy, and every step back toward home felt like dragging a mountain, but Gili gritted his teeth and pressed on.

When he reached his house, he threw the boar down with a heavy thud in front of his door and limped inside. He tore a strip of cloth from an old tunic and wrapped it tightly around his bleeding leg, tying it off with a knot that made him wince.

"No use cryin'. I've lived through worse," he grunted.

Outside, he took up his knife and set to the grim, familiar work of cleaning the kill. He slit the boar's belly carefully, letting the guts spill into a pit he dug nearby. Then he skinned the beast with slow, precise cuts, stripping the hide free and carrying it to the river to wash. The water ran red for a time as he scrubbed it clean. He stretched the skin out on a frame to dry in the sun, weighing the edges down with stones.

The meat was plenty, more than he could eat in a day, even with his stubborn appetite. He needed a place to keep it cool or it would spoil quickly in the warm air.

With a grimace, he grabbed his shovel and crawled under the house. He dug deep and wide, the dirt coming up in thick, dark clumps. Half a day's work saw a small cellar hollowed out beneath the floor, just enough to stand crouched inside. He lined the walls with stones from the river and packed them tight with clay for strength.

After the digging was done, he built a rough shelf from some leftover planks, hammering them together with weary hands. He carried the cleaned cuts of meat down into the cool, earthy dark and stacked them carefully.

"There," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow and leaning heavily against the wall. "Food for many days... and a story to remember it by."

Outside, the sun dipped low over the river, and the world turned soft and gold. Gili sat on the bench he'd built, one hand resting on his bandaged leg, the other holding a bit of pipeweed he rolled between his fingers, drying nicely in the sun.

"A fine day's work," he murmured, watching the smoke from his hearth drift up into the brightening stars. "A fine day's work, and a hard-won meal."

And with the cool wind brushing against his face and the smell of meat, river water, and sweet pipeweed thick in the air, Gili the builder, the hunter, and the survivor closed his eyes and let the world settle quietly around him.

## **First people**

The morning broke warm and still, the sunlight sliding through the cracks in Gili's shutters. He stirred under his blanket, mind still half in dreams, when a loud, firm knock echoed from the door.

Gili jolted upright, frowning, his hand instinctively reaching for the old axe leaning against the wall.

"Who in the nine hells would come all the way out here?" he muttered, swinging his legs off the bed and limping slightly toward the door, his leg still tender from the boar fight days before.

He pulled the door open cautiously, and there on his doorstep stood a dwarf man and woman, both weathered by travel but standing tall with quiet pride. Beside them stood a young dwarven girl, likely in her twenties by the look of her. She clutched a small bundle wrapped in cloth, her dark eyes wide with cautious curiosity.



Behind them, a mule stood tethered to a cart, the wooden bed stacked high with household goods: tools, sacks of food, blankets, and bundles tied in rope.



The man stepped forward first, offering a firm nod.

“Morning, friend. Name’s Orin Stonefoot. This here’s my wife, Bruni, and our daughter, Sif. We’ve been traveling a long way, looking for good land to settle. Saw yer house and thought... maybe this is a safe place. You been livin’ here long?”

Gili scratched his beard, looking them over, weighing the situation. They looked roughened by travel but honest enough.

“Aye,” Gili said at last. “Name’s Gili. Been here some months now. Land’s good. Soil’s rich, river’s clean. Forest’s full of wood and game, if you know where to look. If you’re set on settlin’, you could do far worse.”

Orin glanced at his wife, who gave a tired but hopeful smile. He turned back to Gili, gripping the strap of his belt.

“We’d be mighty grateful. Don’t want to trouble you none—we’ll set up a bit away, build our own house.”

Gili nodded toward the fields. “Plenty of room. Set up where you like.”



With a clap to Gili's shoulder, Orin turned and hopped up onto the cart. He clicked his tongue at the mule and drove the wagon a short way down the field, near a small cluster of trees, before pulling to a stop. The family began unloading their belongings, setting up a stout tent and laying out tools with a practiced air. Gili watched for a moment, then stepped back inside to find some breakfast.

He sat at his little table, chewing thoughtfully on cold slices of boar meat, watching the new neighbors through the open door.

"Well," he said aloud to no one, "looks like the wild's not quite so lonely anymore."

After finishing his meal, Gili rose and wandered over to where Orin was stacking axes, saws, and hammers neatly beside the tent. The two dwarves exchanged a nod of understanding—the silent language of builders.

"Looks like you know your tools," Gili said.

"Built a fair few homes back in the old country," Orin replied. "Left most of it behind when things turned sour. Figured... new land, new start."

Gili crossed his arms. "You'll be needin' help with the heavy liftin'. I'll lend a hand, but the main work's yours."

Orin grinned. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

So the work began. Days passed in a steady rhythm of sawing, hammering, lifting, and hauling. Orin cut his own logs, dragging them from the forest with his mule. Gili helped him lift the heavy trunks into place, offering advice now and then when the frame was being set. They sawed planks side by side, muscles aching but spirits high.

Bruni and Sif worked too, stripping branches, shaping smaller beams, and keeping the campfire burning. In the evenings, the families would sit together, sharing simple meals of boiled barley, roasted roots, and the occasional strip of dried boar meat.

Weeks rolled by, marked by the slow, steady rise of a new house beside Gili's. Log by log, board by board, Orin's home took shape, its walls standing proud and square against the open sky. The roof was thatched with moss and reed, the door hung with sturdy iron hinges Orin had salvaged from the cart.

When the last nail was driven and the last plank planed smooth, Gili stood beside Orin, both of them covered in sweat and sawdust, looking up at the new home.

"Fine work," Gili said, clapping Orin on the back. "Sturdy as stone."

Orin laughed, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "Couldn't have done it so fast without your help."

Gili shrugged, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Neighbors help neighbors. That's how it ought to be."

The sun set golden over the fields, and now, for the first time since Gili had arrived, the clearing felt less like a lonely outpost and more like the beginnings of a true village. A place where a dwarf could live, work, and maybe, just maybe, build something that would last longer than a lifetime.

The sun rose slow and hazy, painting the river mist in golden hues as Gili wiped the sleep from his eyes. He stretched his back with a loud pop and sat on the edge of his bed, staring down at the wooden floor.

"That cellar's too small for a dwarf with dreams," he muttered, standing up and grabbing his shovel.

With a full belly from breakfast and a mind set on work, he crawled down into the cool dark of his small cellar. The earth smelled rich and damp. He set his shoulders to the task, digging deep and wide, matching the shape and size of the house above. Each shovelful of soil he hauled up with a rope and bucket, tossing it outside into growing mounds.

The day wore on, sweat pouring from his brow, but Gili kept at it with that stubborn fire that burns deep in dwarven hearts. When at last the space was hollowed out, he set about cutting stout logs from the forest, trimming them into thick beams. With careful effort, he propped them up against the ceiling, reinforcing it so the house would not sag or sink.

"Hold ye up now, don't fancy wakin' up with my roof in me teeth," he grumbled, bracing the final log with a sharp wedge.

Then he fetched his clay buckets, walking back and forth to the river until he had enough. He plastered the walls thick with wet clay, smoothing it by hand, sealing the earth tight to keep the cold in and the damp out.

Over the next days, he built simple shelves and a few squat closets, hammered from leftover planks, to store goods and food. The cellar smelled clean, earthy, and cool when he finished, a proper dwarven larder.

Rain fell for a few days after, soft and steady, soaking the fields and filling the air with the sweet scent of wet earth. Gili sat in his doorway watching the fruit trees behind the house drinking deep from the storm, their young branches dancing in the breeze.

"Grow strong, ye little saplings," he said, sipping at his berry wine, now a tart, lively brew. "Plenty of rain today, plenty of fruit tomorrow."

One morning when the rains cleared, Gili decided it was time to make the inside of his house look less like a woodshed and more like a proper home. He fetched his planer and spent hours smoothing down every piece of furniture he had built. Long curling shavings of wood fell like pale ribbons to the floor as he worked the rough edges away, leaving the surfaces sleek and fine to the touch.

"There," he said, brushing his hands over the polished table. "Almost looks like I knew what I was doin'."

Later that day, Orin called over from his new house.

"Oi, Gili! Got time to help a man with his hearth?"

Gili wiped the sweat from his face and sauntered over.

"Wouldn't be neighborly to let ye starve now, would it?"

They spent the day laying stones, just as Gili had done in his own home, shaping a wide hearth and a straight chimney. They worked in easy silence most of the time, passing stones, slathering clay, setting each piece into place with steady hands.

As they rested for a moment, Orin leaned on his hammer and said, "You ever think we'd end up like this? Building a village with nothin' but a mule and a dream?"

Gili laughed, a deep, hearty sound. "If ye told me a year ago I'd be buildin' houses instead of battlin' goblins or chasing coin in the mountains, I'd have said you'd drunk too much firewhiskey."

Orin chuckled. "Aye. But here we are. Best thing I ever did, truth be told."

With the hearth finished, Orin wasted no time setting up his forge beside his house. His old anvil, blackened and chipped but still proud, was placed under a simple awning of wood and moss. Sparks flew soon after, the rhythmic clang of hammer on iron echoing across the fields like a heartbeat.

One evening, Gili found Orin digging near the hills to the south. He wandered over, wiping his hands on his trousers.

"What's the game here, Orin? Struck a fancy for rocks now?" Gili teased.



Orin grinned, shoving his pick into the soil. "Aye, rocks full of fire. Coal and iron, lad. Can't have a smith without 'em."

He pointed to a dark seam in the hillside, rich with black coal, and just beyond it, patches of rusty-red stone—iron ore.

"Luck favors the bold," Orin said, hefting a chunk of ore into the cart. "With this, I can mend our tools, shape new ones. Maybe even make a good blade or two."

Gili leaned on his spear, nodding slowly. "A smithy and a builder. A field of barley, a stretch of trees... Won't be long before we've got ourselves a real village."

Orin laughed. "All we need now are a few more stubborn fools like us to show up."

Gili grinned, watching the sunset burn red and gold over the hills. He felt the world settling into place around him, slow and sure as a stone rolling down a mountain. A good life, built one stroke of the hammer and one swing of the axe at a time.

The days rolled by warm and steady, the land soaked in the green richness of early summer. Life took on a simple, satisfying rhythm. Gili and Orin often set out into the woods together, bows and spears in hand, following old game trails through the shadowed forest.

They hunted quietly, side by side, speaking only when necessary. Between them, they brought down a fat doe one morning, its hide clean and unmarked by the kill. They cleaned it together in a small glade, Orin humming an old mountain tune while Gili worked the knife with steady hands.

Back at the camp, Sif—Orin's daughter—showed her talents. She worked the hides with deft fingers, scraping, tanning, and stitching by the firelight. She layered three thick, strong sheets of deerskin together, binding them so tight and smooth that the armor would turn a blade if need be. She carved intricate knotwork patterns into the leather, dwarven symbols of strength and protection, making the armor not just useful but beautiful.

Meanwhile, Orin set his mind to a grander task. He gathered the best of the iron he had mined, smelted it down in his makeshift forge, and hammered it out into something more than just horseshoes and nails. Day after day, he worked in the heat and smoke, the anvil ringing with the sound of a master smith at work. Gili often heard the steady clang from his house, smiling to himself, curious but patient.

One evening, the sun setting low and gold over the field, there was a knock at Gili's door. He opened it to find Orin, Bruni, and Sif standing proudly. In Orin's hands gleamed a sword, newly forged, the hilt wrapped in fresh leather, the blade shining sharp and true. Sif held out a tunic of thick, beautifully carved leather armor, and Bruni carried a simple but sturdy iron helmet under her arm.

"Evening, Gili," Orin said, his face split with a wide grin. "You've been more than neighbor to us. You've been kin. Thought it was time to repay a bit of that."

He handed the sword over with both hands, a gesture of great respect among their kind.

Sif stepped forward, offering the armor with a small, proud smile. "I hope it fits. Worked it by my own hand."

Bruni placed the helmet atop the armor with a wink. "Can't have your thick skull cracked open by some wandering beast."

Gili was silent a moment, his throat thick. He set the gifts down carefully and clasped Orin's forearm in the old dwarven way.

"I... I thank ye," he said roughly. "These are fine works. Finer than I deserve."

Orin chuckled. "You deserve 'em and more, lad. Come on now—invite us in. I'm half starved and your hearth smells better than a feast hall."

Laughing, Gili ushered them all inside. He set a great slab of boar meat roasting over the fire and uncorked his berry brew, pouring mugs for all. They sat around the table, eating and drinking, laughter filling the little house.

Bruni told tales of their old home in the south, Sif spoke of her dreams to build her own workshop someday, and Orin regaled them all with half-true hunting stories that grew more ridiculous with each mug of brew.

Gili leaned back at last, pipe clenched between his teeth, the smoke curling above his head. He pulled the sword from its sheath and turned it over in his hands, admiring the craftsmanship. The blade was perfectly balanced, sharp enough to slice clean through a hanging cloth.

"Ye've got a master's hand, Orin," Gili said, tapping the flat of the blade lightly against his palm.

"Aye," Orin replied, pride flickering in his eyes. "Smithin's in the blood. Twenty winters I swung the hammer before the world turned cruel. Thought maybe I'd never make another true blade. Guess I was waitin' for the right reason."

Gili smiled, running his thumb gently down the leatherwork of the armor, feeling the strength in the stitch and the soul in the carving.

"In Thornwood," Gili said, "all lads trained when we came of age. Sword, spear, bow—enough to guard the village if ever it was needed. Never thought I'd have need again after we lost it... but life's a strange river. Best be ready to swim or sink."

Orin raised his mug high. "To Thornwood! And to new beginnings!"

They clashed their mugs together, ale and berry brew spilling onto the table, and drank deep. Gili leaned back, feeling a weight lift from his heart. Here, in this wild and empty place, they were carving something new from the stones of the old world—one brick, one blade, one friendship at a time.

The morning was cool and still, the sky clear except for a few wisps of cloud drifting high above. Gili sat on his sturdy bench outside his house, the pipe smoldering gently between his

teeth. He puffed contentedly, watching the river shimmer and the young fruit trees sway in the breeze.

As he knocked the ash from his pipe and prepared to fill it again, he caught movement from the corner of his eye. A mule was approaching, pulling a cart piled high with bundles. Leading it was a broad-shouldered dwarf with a thick brown beard, his tunic patched and his boots worn. Beside him walked a boy, perhaps barely into manhood, carrying a walking stick and looking around wide-eyed at the open field and the two small houses standing proud.

Gili stood, squinting against the sun, and waited as they approached.

The dwarf raised a hand in greeting. "Good morn to ye, friend. Name's Pula Stonehammer, and this here's my boy, Daran. We been travelin' far and long, lookin' for a place to lay roots."

Gili nodded, clasping the man's arm firmly. "Gili Hammerfell. Welcome to our little village, such as it is. What brings ye this way?"

Pula sighed, his shoulders sagging a little. "Our home... up in the northern mountains. Burned to cinders. Band of robbers set upon us like wolves. Took what they could, burned what they couldn't. We've been wanderin' ever since. Tired of runnin'. Heard tell of good land down this way, and... well, here we are."

Gili looked at the boy, who offered a small, hopeful smile despite the journey's wear.

"You're welcome here," Gili said. "There's good land, strong water, and folk that'll lend a hand when needed."

Relief washed over Pula's face. He clasped Gili's shoulder tightly. "Ye've got my thanks, truly. I've little left but my hands are strong and my heart's true. I'll work for it, every bit."

Gili grinned. "No man—or dwarf—owes more than a neighbor's debt. Come. We'll get you set proper."

Not long after, Gili fetched Orin, who was hammering away at a new hoe blade near his anvil.

"Another family's come," Gili said, leaning on the post. "They'll be needin' a roof."

Orin set down his hammer with a laugh. "Good! A village ain't worth the name without folk in it. Let's raise another house, then."

The three of them set to work. They picked a spot near Orin's home, where the trees broke into a flat patch of good soil. They felled nearby trees, trimmed the logs, and dragged them into place. Pula, strong and determined, hauled timber shoulder to shoulder with them, never pausing longer than a few breaths. His boy Daran helped too, rolling smaller logs, fetching tools, and holding planks steady.

Gili and Orin handled most of the cutting and the framing, with Gili muttering as he hammered nails deep.

"Straight walls, stout walls... no place for sloppy work when you're buildin' a life."

Orin chuckled from the other side, where he was setting up the beginnings of the roof. "Remind me never to build a crooked house near Gili Hammerfell."

Pula wiped the sweat from his brow and said, grinning, "With neighbors like you two, I reckon we'll have a whole town before long."

The house rose steadily. A smaller dwelling than Gili's and Orin's, but strong and warm. By the time the roof was laid with moss and timber, and the hearth stacked with river stones, it was a home, not just a shelter.

That evening, as the sun dipped low and painted the hills in fire, Pula and Daran stood before their new house, awe and gratitude thick in their eyes.

Pula turned to Gili. "I owe ye more than words can give. If ye'll have me, I'll work your fields, hunt your woods, fish your river. You've given us a new life."

Gili clapped him hard on the back. "Ye owe me nothin', Pula. But if ye want to lend a hand, I'd not say no. Barley's ready for harvest soon. Could use good backs for it."

"And I'll keep the woods watched too," Pula added. "Ain't no robber nor beast gonna sneak up on our homes."

Gili smiled wide, pipe smoke curling from his lips. "Good. Then it's settled. Welcome to the village, Stonehammers. May it be the last place ye'll ever need to find."

That night, they gathered under the stars around a great fire, roasting the last of the deer meat, drinking berry brew, and telling stories. The village, still nameless, now had a heart—and it beat stronger with every hand that built, every voice that laughed, and every soul that dared to call it home.

The morning broke hot and golden, and the village stirred with a purpose different from any day before. Today was the beginning of the harvest.

Orin was already up before dawn, his forge clanging sharp and clear through the fresh air. Gili walked over, wiping the sleep from his eyes and chuckling.

"Already hammerin' away, are ye?" Gili said.

Orin grinned, sweat already gleaming on his brow. "Can't cut barley with bare hands, lad. Making a few sickles for the work. Shouldn't take long."

True to his word, by the time the sun had risen fully, Orin had fashioned three stout sickles with curved blades and short wooden handles, sharp enough to whisper through the barley like a breeze. He handed one each to Gili and Pula, keeping the last for himself.

Gili hefted the sickle, testing the weight. "Fine work, Orin. Might even make me look like I know what I'm doin'."

Pula laughed, swinging his own in a mock battle stance. "We'll reap it like warriors!"

They made their way to the field where the barley stood tall and golden, rippling in the warm breeze like a sea of treasure. The three dwarves set to work, cutting careful swathes through the stalks, gathering them into neat bundles. Sweat poured down their faces, and their arms ached from the steady rhythm of swing and pull, swing and pull, but none of them complained.

By day's end, they had laid out the cut barley in broad mats across the open field, leaving it to dry under the fierce sun. They sat on Gili's bench that evening, wiping their brows, sharing a skin of berry brew between them.

"A fine start," Pula said, leaning back. "A fine start to many harvests to come."

In the days that followed, the dried barley was gathered up and carried into Gili's house. There, they spread it thick across the wooden floor. They spent long hours beating the heads against the ground with sticks and clubs, loosening the seeds from the chaff. Dust filled the air, sticking to their sweaty faces, but the seeds rolled free like golden rain.

"Aye," Gili said, catching a handful of the precious seeds and letting them trickle through his fingers, "this is the true treasure of the earth."

Buckets were filled with the seeds, heavy and sweet-smelling. Bruni took charge next, hauling a bucket to her home. She brought out two flat grinding stones she had kept from their old village. She poured the seeds between them and ground them with steady, circular movements, slowly but surely turning the barley into a coarse, nutty flour.

The scent of fresh bread soon filled the air, rich and warm, wrapping around the little village like a mother's hug.

Gili, meanwhile, had a different plan. He set about brewing barley ale. He first soaked a good portion of the barley seeds in a bucket of clean water, letting them soak until they softened. Then, he spread the soaked seeds out on a flat stone slab, covered them with damp cloth, and let them sprout for a few days, checking them morning and night.

When the seeds sprouted tiny white shoots, he roasted them gently over a low fire, turning them into malt. The sweet smell of roasting grain filled his house. He ground the malted barley roughly, boiled it in river water in his biggest pot, and added a handful of wild herbs from the fields for flavor.

After boiling, he cooled the mixture and poured it into one of his large clay buckets, adding a bit of leftover berry brew as a starter. He set the bucket in the corner, covering it with cloth, and let it work its slow magic into ale.

"Soon enough," he said, patting the bucket fondly, "we'll have more than just water and dreams to drink."

While the barley brew worked, Orin and Gili took their tools and went to Pula's house. With practiced hands, they built another hearth and chimney, stacking stones and sealing them with clay, the smoke soon rising clean and true from Pula's rooftop.



"That's it," Orin said, stepping back and wiping his hands. "Now ye can cook, keep warm, and live like proper folk."

Pula nodded, his voice thick. "I owe you both more than words can say."

"Pay us back by bakin' better bread than Bruni," Gili joked, dodging a playful swat from Bruni herself.

Days later, the first loaves were ready. Bruni baked thick, round loaves with golden crusts and soft, hearty centers. She carried them out on a wooden board, the smell making every stomach in the village grumble loud as thunder.

The dwarves sat together on Gili's bench, tearing into the bread with eager hands, butter melting into the warm crumb. They ate and laughed, faces lit with simple joy.

"By the gods," Gili said, his mouth full, "this tastes better than anything I've ever had at a king's table."

In the weeks that followed, the spirit of growth took hold. Pula, with Gili's old plow and the faithful mule, turned another field beside his house, and soon after, planted more barley. The warm climate meant another harvest could come before winter. Inspired by the success, they plowed yet another field near Orin's house, planting it full of seed.

Each night, they sat around the fire, sipping berry brew, smoking pipes, and talking of the future.

"We're buildin' more than homes here," Orin said one evening, watching the fields sway under the stars.

"Aye," Gili agreed. "We're buildin' a life."

And the fields, the homes, the laughter that filled the warm summer nights—all of it was proof that the stone foundations of their new village were laid not just in wood and earth, but in hope, hard work, and the unbreakable bonds of kinship.

The village settled into a slow, steady rhythm, the kind of life that shapes itself without hurry, like a river carving stone. Each day brought the same honest labors—hunting, tending fields, repairing tools—and each evening brought rest, talk, and the warm glow of shared meals.

Pula had taken to the woods early most mornings, bow slung across his back and spear in hand. He hunted carefully, respectfully, never taking more than needed. Often he returned with rabbits, grouse, or baskets full of fish caught from the river, which he shared equally with Orin's family and Gili.

One crisp afternoon, Gili sat on his bench, pipe smoldering between his teeth, as Sif walked over with a bundle of leather strips tucked under her arm. She sat beside him, tucking her legs under her and setting her work carefully in her lap.

"Workin' on a new tunic?" Gili asked, puffing a smoke ring into the lazy breeze.

Sif smiled. "Thought to patch up Da's old jerkin. Won't win any prizes for beauty, but it'll keep the rain out."

Gili chuckled, shifting his pipe between his fingers. "Useful hands you've got, lass. Was thinkin' maybe you'd show me a bit o' that craft? Could be handy, y'know, if I ever split my boots or get it into my head to stitch a new belt."

She laughed lightly, a sound like river stones clinking. "And you? Maybe you can teach me a thing or two about brew. Da says your barley ale could wake the dead."

Gili leaned back against the wall of his house, smiling through the smoke. "Aye, that I can do. We'll start with the maltin'... but be warned, it's thirsty work."

Meanwhile, Orin had other plans. With two mules now living fat off the field's edge, he and Gili fashioned a rough corral from felled saplings and sturdy rope. Orin chuckled as he ushered the beasts together.

"Time to think about the next generation," Orin said, slapping one mule on the flank. "Can't haul all this stone and grain ourselves forever."

Gili puffed on his pipe, watching the animals with a grin. "Good strong stock, these two. With a bit of luck, we'll have a foal or two before next year."

Bruni, too, had her hands full. She spent an entire day far from the village edge, moving quietly through the woodlands and meadows. She returned in the evening with baskets brimming not just with wild potatoes and carrots, but also sturdy yellow-root, spiced green bulbs called fireleek, and sweet sun-crowns, a flower with edible, nutty seeds hidden in thick pods.

She wasted no time. By the next morning, she had cleared a patch beside their house and built a tidy vegetable garden. Gili and Orin helped lay down stones for paths between the rows, and Pula carried buckets of water to dampen the fresh soil.

"By next season," Bruni said proudly, patting a row of seedlings, "we'll be feasting like mountain kings."

As days passed, warm rain swept over the fields, soaking the crops and gardens. The barley grew thick and tall again, and the fruit trees behind Gili's house grew heavy with their first gifts. He picked apples, along with the hard, sweet stonefruit called thornplums, and soft golden fruit the size of a fist known as rivergold.

Gili loaded his basket full and wandered from house to house, handing out fruit to each neighbor with a simple grin.

"Good soil," he said as he passed a bright apple to Bruni. "Good work. Good life."

Evenings became gatherings. One night, Gili brought out his first proper cask of barley ale, thick and foamy with a rich golden color. They gathered around his firepit outside, mugs filled to the brim, the smell of roasting meat and pipeweed heavy in the air.

Orin lifted his mug first, sniffed the brew, and roared with laughter.

"Smells like a proper dwarf made it!" he cried, before gulping down half the mug in a single pull.

Pula grinned, not to be outdone, and drained his as well, slapping his thigh. "By the stones, Gili, you could sell this to kings!"

Bruni sipped more carefully, her eyes lighting up. "Smooth and strong. You've outdone yourself, lad."

They drank and laughed late into the night, trading old songs from lost homes, telling tales tall enough to touch the stars, and letting the fire burn low and friendly. The pipe was passed around, and the sounds of singing drifted out over the fields, over the river, into the warm summer darkness.

Their village was small, just a few families, a few fields, and a handful of houses—but it was alive, and growing, fed by good earth, strong hands, and hearts that knew how to endure. Here, they had built not just shelter, but a future. Here, they had found a home.

The sun was barely a finger above the horizon when Orin, Gili, and Pula gathered outside Gili's house, mugs of steaming river tea in hand, the morning air cool and fresh.

"We've got fields," Orin said, rubbing his beard thoughtfully, "we've got gardens... but we're missin' somethin'. Somethin' with feathers."

Gili puffed on his pipe and nodded. "Aye. Birds. Good for eggs, meat too, and easy to keep."

Pula leaned on his spear, grinning. "I've seen wild featherhens down by the marsh, and even a few rock-quails near the river bend. Both good layers, and hardy as stone."

Gili stood, stretching his back with a groan. "Right then. Let's catch us a few."

First, Gili got to work building a pen beside his house. He hammered together stout posts, set them deep into the earth, and wove thinner branches between them to make a strong fence. A simple wooden gate finished it, secured with a leather latch.

Once the pen was ready, the three men packed up thick wool blankets and small sacks of barley grain to use as bait. They set off into the fields and meadows, moving low and slow through the tall grass, the sun climbing steadily behind them.

They crept for hours, keeping their eyes peeled for signs of movement. At last, near a small grove where the grass grew short and thick, they spotted a small flock of featherhens—fat, speckled birds with quick legs—and a few sturdier rock-quails scratching in the dirt nearby.

"Now's our chance," Pula whispered, nodding toward the group.

The three men fanned out slowly, surrounding the birds. Gili clutched his blanket tightly, heart thudding with excitement.

"Closer... closer..." Orin muttered under his breath.

At a silent signal, they all lunged, throwing their blankets wide. The field exploded with squawks and feathers as the birds panicked. Gili managed to pin a flapping featherhen beneath his blanket, while Orin wrestled two squawking rock-quails into a sack. Pula scrambled after a third bird, laughing as it darted between his legs, before finally catching it up.

"Four's a good haul!" Orin said, panting and holding the sack tight. "Let's not push our luck."

Back at the village, they carefully plucked a few of the larger flight feathers from the birds' wings, just enough to ground them without harming them. They settled the birds into the new pen, tossing a few handfuls of grain inside. The birds took to their new home quickly, scratching and pecking at the earth.

Within days, the hens began laying eggs, which they sat on patiently. Weeks later, a chorus of tiny peeps filled the pen as ten small hatchlings emerged, fluff balls of yellow and brown. Gili, watching them from the gate with his pipe in hand, shook his head in amazement.

"From nothin' to a proper farm in half a year," he said. "Wouldn't have believed it if I weren't seein' it."

But Gili was not one to sit idle for long. One afternoon, he decided the village needed another cart, now that there were more goods to haul—vegetables, timber, stone. He set off into the woods with his axe, selecting straight, sturdy trees for the job.

He felled them with steady, rhythmic swings, trimmed them clean, and hauled the logs back to his worksite. Over the next days, he sawed them into planks and beams, the smell of fresh-cut wood thick in the air.

Meanwhile, Orin had hammered out a fine batch of nails at his forge, stacking them neatly in a wooden box for whenever needed. He also forged strong iron rims for cart wheels, understanding the weight they would need to bear.

One morning, Gili and Orin worked side by side, assembling the cart. Gili built the frame, fitting the beams together snug and true, while Orin shaped the wheels, setting the iron rims over the wooden rounds.

"Push it a bit harder, Gili!" Orin barked as they fitted the last rim into place, the metal shrieking as it slid onto the wheel.

Gili grunted, shoving with all his strength. "Feels like I'm wrestlin' a troll!"

With a final shove, the rim snapped tight around the wood.

"There!" Orin said, clapping Gili on the back. "Solid as mountain bone."

They stood back, admiring the finished cart. Sturdy, wide-wheeled, and built to last. It would make hauling goods tenfold easier.

"Three carts now, for three homes," Gili said with satisfaction. "We'll be haulin' enough to build a whole city if we keep on at this pace."

Pula, passing by with a bundle of firewood, laughed. "One cart for barley, one for stone, one for ale! That's what I say!"

The village thrived under the bright summer sky, every hammer stroke and harvested seed pushing them closer to a life they could be proud of—a life built with their own hands, strong enough to last for generations.

One evening, under the setting sun, the village folk gathered near Gili's bench to discuss something long overdue—the naming of their home. They sat in a circle, the warm air filled with the scent of pipeweed and fresh bread, mugs of barley ale in hand.

"We've built ourselves somethin' that'll stand longer than our bones," Orin said, tapping his mug thoughtfully. "It ought to have a name."

Pula nodded, stretching his legs out. "Aye. Can't be just 'the village' forever."

They tossed around names for a while—Stonefield, Rivermark, Oakend—but none felt quite right. Gili leaned back, looking out at the trees still ringing the fields, their silver-white trunks catching the last of the light.

"What about Birchgrove?" he said, voice low but certain. "First trees we felled to build my house. First shelter this land saw."

Orin slapped his knee with a grin. "Birchgrove it is, then."

"Aye," Pula agreed, raising his mug. "To Birchgrove!"

The others echoed the toast, and the name settled over the village like an old, comfortable cloak.

In the days that followed, life continued to flourish. One morning, Orin came running from the corral, laughing and shouting.

"She's birthed 'em!" he cried. "Two strong little mules!"

Everyone gathered around to see the tiny foals, wobbling on unsteady legs, their coats still damp and shining under the sun. They were kept close to Orin's house, watched over carefully, the promise of future strength for the village.

But there was no time to rest. The men decided it was time for hard work—preparation for the future. They spent almost a full week in the forest, felling trees, cutting them into thick logs, and sawing planks. The sound of axes echoed through the woods, and the air smelled of fresh sap and earth.

Gili wiped his brow one afternoon, leaning on his axe. "Feels like we're clearin' half the forest."

Orin, stacking planks into neat piles, laughed. “Best to have too much wood than not enough when winter thinks of showin’ its ugly face.”

Pula rolled a log into place and grunted. “And there’s always somethin’ needin’ buildin’. Better to be ready.”

By the end of the week, they had amassed a mountain of timber near the village center, enough to last them for many seasons of work.

Their next great task was to build a well. Though the river flowed clean and sweet, it was still a fair walk from the village. Having water close at hand would make all the difference.

They picked a spot in the middle of the village, near where their houses formed a rough circle, and began to dig. Day after day, they dug deep into the earth, taking turns with shovels and buckets, the stone and dirt flying up in great clouds.

Orin wiped the sweat from his brow, grinning through the dirt. “If dwarves were meant for diggin’, we might’ve been born moles.”

Gili, hauling up another bucket of soil, chuckled. “If moles drank ale and smoked pipes, maybe.”

After nearly a week, they struck water. Cold, clear water that bubbled up to greet them. They lined the inside of the well with smooth stones, fitting them tightly to keep the walls from collapsing.

Gili crafted another sturdy bucket and attached it to a leather rope wound around a strong wooden beam set across the well. With a few good pulls, the first bucket of sweet, cold water was hoisted up, and they drank deep, laughing and wiping their faces.

"Now that’s proper," Pula said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Our own water, close to home."

But Gili and Orin had another duty weighing on their hearts. They spoke one evening by the fire, sharing quiet words about the old ways.

“The gods of earth and forest have given much,” Gili said, his voice reverent. “We owe them honor, thanks.”

Orin nodded, his face solemn. “Aye. Without their favor, no crop grows, no stone holds.”

The next morning, Gili cleared a spot behind his house where the land rose gently and the trees thinned. He carried stones, one by one, laying them in a half-circle. He built a small altar from the largest rocks, stacking them carefully, shaping them into a rugged shrine.

Pula came with his carving knives and set to work on the pillars. He etched old symbols into the stone—runes of strength, harvest, and protection. The carvings were rough but filled with meaning, deep lines catching the sunlight and shadows alike.

When the shrine was finished, they stood together, silent, heads bowed.

Gili lit a small fire on the altar, tossing in sprigs of green leaves and a sip of his finest brew.

"To the old gods," he said, voice steady. "To the stones and trees, to river and sky. Watch over Birchgrove, and may it grow strong."

The smoke curled upward into the blue sky, and the village of Birchgrove stood a little prouder that day, roots digging deeper into the good earth they now called home.

The days slipped by warm and bright, the fields thick with green life and the sound of hammering and laughter rolling across the land. Birchgrove was no longer a handful of houses—no, it was becoming something more with each passing day.

One morning as Gili was hauling fresh water from the well, he spotted two carts rolling in from the south, raising small plumes of dust. He set the bucket down and shaded his eyes, watching as the carts drew closer. They were dwarves, no doubt about it, stout and broad, travel-worn but full of hope.

The first cart bore a man and his wife, and behind them, three sons—young men, hardy and strong, each looking around with sharp, eager eyes. The second cart carried another family: a man, a woman, and four children, barely more than sixteen winters old, their faces fresh and curious.

Gili, pipe tucked between his teeth, walked out to meet them, waving them closer.

"Greetings, travelers!" he called out. "Ye've found Birchgrove, if that's what ye're after. And if it's land and work you seek, ye'll find both in plenty."

The first man, whose beard was touched with silver, stepped down and offered his hand. "Name's Balric Stonevein. This here's my wife Hilda and my sons: Bram, Kendric, and Ulric. We've been wanderin' long after leavin' the western mountains. Heard tell of new places risin' in the wilds."

The second man, a bit younger, nodded with a tired but thankful look. "I'm Droган Hearthfinder, and this is my wife Elva, and our lot: Rune, Mara, Jori, and little Selda. We've not much left, but our hands are strong."

Gili shook each hand firmly. "Then you're welcome here. There's land enough for all who'll work it. We'll help ye raise homes, just as was done for us."

In the days that followed, the village came together with a fierce energy. With so many willing hands, two new houses sprang up quickly, each with solid walls and strong hearths. Orin oversaw the stonework for the chimneys, Pula helped cut and drag timber, and Gili directed the setting of frames and rafters.

On one hot afternoon, as they were setting the final beams into Balric's roof, Gili leaned on his hammer, grinning wide.

"Look at this place grow," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Feels like I blink and there's another house."

Orin, tightening a rope around the beam, chuckled. "Keep blinkin', Gili. Maybe one day ye'll wake up to a town."

Once the homes were finished, the new families wasted no time. Balric's sons tilled new fields, muscles honed from years of mountain labor now turning the rich soil of Birchgrove. Drogan and Elva planted fruit saplings they had carried in their cart—more apple trees, some plum, and a few hardy nut-trees they hoped would one day bear.

The entire village moved with one purpose. Fields were expanded, and with the growing number of crops, it was clear the animals needed better shelter. So, the villagers turned their attention to building a barn. They felled trees together, cut planks, and hammered beams under Orin's watchful eye.



The barn rose on the far side of the village, near the fields. Broad and sturdy, it would house the growing herd of mules, and store feed and tools.

As they hoisted the final beam into place, Bruni stood back, wiping her hands on her apron.

"A proper village now," she said, smiling. "Houses, fields, barns. What more could we ask for?"

"A good harvest, and peace to enjoy it," Pula answered, driving a final nail into the barn door.

Meanwhile, the bird pens had flourished. The first flock of featherhens and rock-quails had multiplied, and now, every household built their own small pens, each filled with clucking, scratching birds. Meat and fresh eggs were now part of every meal, and the laughter of children chasing after chicks filled the air.



Bruni, ever the wise woman, took it upon herself to share the bounty of the gardens. She divided tubers—potatoes, carrots, fireleek bulbs, and sun-crowns—among the new families, showing them where to plant, how deep to set each seed.

"Plant 'em right," she instructed Rune and Mara, who listened wide-eyed, "and ye'll have enough to fill your bellies through winter and still have some for next sowin'."

Every house soon had a neat patch of vegetables growing out back, rows of green promising future harvests.

One evening, after the day's work was done, the villagers gathered at the firepit near the well. Gili passed around mugs of his latest batch of barley ale, rich and smooth from the fresh malt. They sat in a wide circle, faces lit by the firelight, the smell of roasting meat and baking bread thick in the warm summer air.

Balric raised his mug high. "To Birchgrove! May it grow strong and true!"

"To Birchgrove!" they all echoed, mugs clashing and laughter rising to meet the stars.

Seventeen souls now called Birchgrove home. Seventeen hearts, seventeen dreams, woven together by stone, soil, and sweat, standing proud and unshaken in a wild and wide world.

The days of Birchgrove were rich and full, the fields swaying with grain and the gardens heavy with green. Yet Gili, ever restless in his own way, decided it was time to think ahead, to build more than just the basics.

One morning, after a hearty breakfast of bread and fried eggs, Gili set to work in his cellar. He had a mind to brew larger batches of his barley ale, enough to last the village through long feasts and celebrations. With a saw and hammer in hand, he began crafting large barrels from the sturdy planks he had prepared earlier.

He shaped the staves carefully, hammering them into a circle, drawing the wood tight with iron bands. Inside each barrel, he smoothed a thin layer of fresh clay, sealing the wood against leaks, just as the old mountain brewers had taught him long ago. He let the barrels dry, the earthy smell of clay filling the cellar.

By the end of the week, six great barrels stood proudly in a neat row, and Gili repeated the ale-making process with practiced ease—soaking, sprouting, roasting the barley, then boiling it with river water and wild herbs before setting it to ferment.

"Soon enough," Gili said, tapping one of the barrels affectionately, "we'll be swimmin' in the finest brew this side o' the mountains."

But even with the barrels bubbling away quietly, Gili found his mind drifting. His house, solid though it was, felt small. He wanted a room of his own, a place to sleep with a door between himself and the world. So he began marking out an expansion.

One crisp morning, he stood with Orin, Pula, Balric, and Drogon at the side of his house, scratching lines into the dirt.

"Reckon just a simple room," Gili said, "with space for a bed and a cabinet. Nothin' fancy."

Orin clapped him on the back. "Every dwarf deserves a bit o' peace at day's end."

With willing hands, they built quickly. They cut fresh logs, raised the frame, and laid a moss-covered roof just like the original house. The sound of hammering and sawing filled the air, and laughter mixed with the rhythmic work.

When the structure was done, Gili took his axe and chopped out a rough doorway between the old house and the new. He dragged his bed into the new room, setting it against the far wall, and began building a simple cabinet from the leftover planks. He ran his planer carefully over the wood until it gleamed smooth under his hands.

Just as he was brushing away the last curls of wood, Sif appeared at his door with a bundle in her arms.

"Thought you might have need of these," she said, handing him several thick animal hides. "Leftovers from the last few hunts. Good warm blankets when the wind turns sharp."

Gili took the hides with a wide grin. "Thank ye, Sif. I'll sleep like a king come winter."

He hung one of the hides across the doorway for now, a soft, earthy curtain. On the wall above his bed, he mounted the preserved head of the first boar he had slain—the one that had nearly taken his life. The great beast's tusks still gleamed, a grim reminder of that brutal day.

Standing before it, Gili drew his sword, turning the blade carefully in the light. The steel flashed bright and fierce, perfectly balanced and deadly sharp.

"Still sharp as fire," he murmured, running his thumb lightly along the edge. He set the sword back on the shelf above his new cabinet with a sense of quiet pride.

The days were long with work, but the nights were filled with life. As the sun set and the stars stretched across the dark velvet sky, the village gathered around the central firepit they had built near the well.

Children scampered about, playing and laughing. Bruni and Hilda often sang old mountain songs, their voices weaving through the crackling fire. The men shared stories—some true, many stretched as wide as the river—with mugs of barley ale passed freely between them.

One night, Balric leaned close to the fire, his face half in shadow. "Back in the stone halls of Ironcrest," he said, "we once dug so deep we found a river of fire. Had to seal it up with stone and prayer."

Gili chuckled, raising his mug. "Sounds like a tale to keep young ones in their beds."

Orin laughed, slapping his knee. "Or keep the old ones dreamin' of treasure!"

Around the fire, the newcomers and the old settlers sat side by side, their faces lit by flame and fellowship. The village of Birchgrove had grown from a lone house on the riverbank into a true home—a place of stone, sweat, song, and story.

And in the heart of it, Gili smiled through his pipe smoke, feeling the kind of peace he had only ever dreamed of in the ashes of Thornwood.

The air had turned sharper with each passing day, the once-heavy warmth of summer now cooled into crisp mornings and damp, misty afternoons. Birchgrove moved with the seasons, slow but sure. Gili and Pula spent days cutting down the second harvest of barley from Gili's field, their sickles flashing under the pale sun. Others did the same in their own plots. This harvest was a little leaner than the first—shorter stalks, smaller grains—but it was enough to carry them through.

Each evening, the village huddled around fires, cloaks drawn tight against the chill. The rain came more often now, light but steady, slicking the stone hearths and turning the field edges to soft mud. No snow touched this land, only the restless whisper of cold breezes sliding over the fields and stirring the bare branches of the birches.

## **A Visitor**

One night, Gili lay in his bed, snoring loudly under his thick hides, the warmth of the fire in his hearth slowly dying to glowing embers. Then he heard a scratching sound at the door. Sharp, deliberate, scraping.

He sat up, blinking blearily into the darkness. For a moment, he thought maybe it was just the wind, but no—the sound came again, persistent.

Grumbling, Gili swung his legs off the bed, muttering under his breath. "Orin, if that's you wantin' a drink at this hour, I'll plant my boot so far up yer arse you'll be tastin' leather."

He stomped to the door, scratching his beard, and called out, "Pula? Sif? Speak up if it's ye! And what in the nine bloody hells are ye scratchin' for? Ever heard of knockin', ye daft bastards?"

No answer. Only silence—and the soft, deliberate scrape again.

Grumbling darkly, Gili yanked the door wide open.

There stood a man. A human. His eyes were deep black pits, glinting under the thin light of the dying fire behind Gili. His skin was pale, his cloak hanging ragged around him, mud caked on his boots.

Gili frowned. "And who in all blazes are you then? Wanderin' round scratchin' folk's doors like some half-wit goblin?"

Before Gili could blink, the man's body spasmed. His mouth twisted, pulling back into a snarling snout. Coarse hair sprouted over his cheeks, his shoulders broadened, his spine snapping audibly as it twisted into a new, terrible shape.

"Mother o' stone," Gili breathed, taking a step back, his heart hammering.

The beast growled deep from its belly and lunged. Gili had just enough time to throw up his arms before the werewolf crashed into him, sending them both sprawling onto the floor of his living room, knocking a chair and table flying.

Gili wrestled with the creature, its foul breath hot in his face, its teeth snapping inches from his throat. He strained against it with all his strength, muscles burning.

"Son of a filthy goblin-ruttin' swamp rat!" Gili roared, pushing back against the snapping jaws.

The werewolf raked at him with its claws, tearing Gili's shirt to tatters, leaving burning lines of blood across his chest. He grunted and cursed, struggling to keep the beast's teeth from finding his neck.



"Get off me, ye hairy, flea-bitten sack o' shite!"

He could feel his strength slipping. The werewolf pushed harder, foam flying from its maw.

Desperate, Gili shifted his weight, kicking one leg up and throwing the beast to the side just enough to break free. He scrambled for the shelf where his sword lay—the fine blade Orin had forged with his own hands.

The werewolf lunged again, but Gili's fingers closed around the sword's hilt. In one savage motion, he swung the blade. The sharp steel sang through the air—and the beast's left arm fell with a wet thud onto the floor, severed clean at the elbow.

The werewolf let out a bone-chilling howl, snapping its jaws in rage. In the chaos, it managed to sink its teeth into Gili's forearm, tearing flesh and muscle. Gili roared in pain but did not let go of the sword.

"Ye bastard!" he bellowed through gritted teeth.

With a final surge of fury, Gili drove the sword straight into the werewolf's chest. The blade pierced deep, the beast letting out one last, shuddering growl before collapsing atop him.

Breathing hard, chest heaving, Gili shoved the dead weight off and staggered to his feet, blood running from the bite on his arm.

He kicked the limp corpse once for good measure.

"Scratch my bloody door again, will ye?" he muttered between heavy breaths, spitting a wad of blood-tinged saliva onto the floor. "Next time, knock proper."

He leaned heavily against the wall, sliding down to sit beside the crackling embers, the sword still clenched tight in his bloodied hand, the firelight flickering off its crimson-stained blade.

Outside, the night wind howled through the trees, but inside, Gili Hammerfell sat victorious—and alive—though now carrying a wound and a story none would believe come morning.

Gili sat slumped by the hearth, his head heavy with exhaustion. His hand throbbed fiercely where the werewolf had bitten him, but he forced himself to move. He fetched a bucket of fresh water from the well, sloshing it over the deep gash on his forearm. The cold bit deep into the wound, but he gritted his teeth and scrubbed it clean. Blood mixed with water, swirling pink at the bottom of the bucket.

"Nine bloody hells," Gili muttered under his breath, tearing a strip from the remains of his ripped shirt. He tied it tight around his forearm, knotting it roughly with his teeth. "Where in stone's name did that beast crawl up from?"

He turned to stare at the werewolf's corpse, sprawled out cold and stiff in the middle of his living room, blood soaked into the wood floor.

Gili scratched at his beard thoughtfully. "Mount yer head next to the boar, eh? That'd give visitors a fright they wouldn't soon forget."

He gave a half-hearted chuckle but shook his head. His heart still raced from the fight, every creak of the house making him jump. He threw another log on the fire, wrapped himself in a blanket, and tried to sleep. But sleep wouldn't come. His mind replayed the attack again and again—the weight of the beast, the stink of its breath, the feeling of those teeth sinking into his flesh.

By the time morning light crept in under the door, Gili couldn't sit still anymore. He grabbed his cloak, tossed it over his shoulders, and stormed out into the village.

The first he came upon was Orin, hammering away at a cracked hoe near the forge.

"Orin!" Gili barked.

Orin looked up, wiping his blackened hands on a rag. "What's got yer beard in a knot?"

Gili gestured wildly back toward his house. "Had a bloody werewolf at me door last night! Fought it off in me own house! Killed the bastard with me sword!"

Orin blinked, then grinned, half disbelieving. "A werewolf? In Birchgrove?"

"Aye! Scratched at me door like some cursed spirit," Gili said, voice rising. "I opened up thinkin' it was one of ye fools and next thing I know I'm fightin' for me own damn life!"

A small crowd began to gather—Pula, Sif, Balric, Drogan, Bruni—all with wary eyes and quiet whispers. The younger ones clutched each other nervously.

Orin crossed his arms, brow furrowed. "Why didn't ye shout for help, Gili? Could've had the whole village swingin' axes at it."

Gili shook his head, cheeks red. "Everything happened so damn fast! I barely had time to grab me sword, let alone yell! Lucky enough I managed to kill the cursed thing at all."

Orin clapped him on the back hard enough to nearly topple him. "Well, lucky ye are. A fool sometimes, but lucky!"

Together, they marched to Gili's house. The villagers crowded around the doorway as Orin and Gili dragged the heavy corpse outside. Flies already buzzed around the bloody fur. They carried it to the edge of the forest and dug a deep pit, shoveling earth over the twisted body until it was swallowed by the dirt.

"Good riddance," Pula muttered, tossing the last spadeful of earth over the grave.

Afterward, life in Birchgrove slowly returned to its steady pace. Orin went back to the mines, chipping away at the iron ore and coal deep in the hills, carting it back to his forge where the fire roared day and night as he repaired tools and crafted nails.

The women tended the vegetable gardens, plucking late season crops and minding the growing flock of birds. Bruni taught the younger girls how to knead bread and tend to the small pens.

Meanwhile, Sif came to Gili's house carrying a basket of herbs, a serious look in her brown eyes.

"Let's see that bite," she said firmly, pushing Gili into a chair like a stubborn mule.

He grunted but didn't resist. She untied the grimy cloth and frowned at the wound—angry red but not yet festering.

"You're lucky, Gili," she said, grinding a paste of wild silverleaf and blueroot in a small stone bowl. "Werewolf bites can rot a man from the inside if ye don't treat 'em."

She smeared the pungent paste onto the wound. It burned like fire, and Gili cursed under his breath.

"Damned roots feel like they're eatin' my arm off!"

Sif laughed softly. "Better that than lettin' the rot have ye."

She rewrapped the wound with a clean strip of linen and tied it neatly.

Afterwards, they sat together on the bench outside Gili's house. The sun was soft, the air crisp and sweet with the scent of wet earth. They watched the villagers moving about their work, the simple life of Birchgrove going on.

"You're brave, Gili," Sif said after a time, her voice quiet but certain. "Facing that thing alone, sword in hand."

Gili shrugged, puffing at his pipe. "Brave or stupid... sometimes I reckon there ain't much difference."

Sif smiled. "Maybe. But even a stupid brave man saves a village now and again."

He chuckled, smoke curling from his lips into the cool air. For a long time, they sat together, talking of village life, the crops, the harvests to come. The fear of the night still clung to Gili's mind, but it felt smaller now, wrapped in the warmth of friendship and the growing strength of the village he helped build.

The crisp morning air carried a tang of wet leaves and woodsmoke as Gili, Orin, and Pula prepared for their hunt. They checked their bows, spears, and quivers before setting off into the thick woods beyond the village. The trees stood tall and silent, their bare branches scratching against the sky.

For hours, the three dwarves moved with careful steps through the undergrowth, boots sinking into the soft moss. They spoke in low murmurs, their eyes sharp for any sign of game.

"There's tracks here," Pula whispered, crouching low to the ground and pointing. Fresh hoof marks, deep and deliberate.

Gili nodded, stringing an arrow. "Deer. Close enough we might just have a chance."

They stalked the trail for a good while longer, hearts pounding, every creak of a twig sounding like thunder in their ears. Finally, through the thinning mist, they caught sight of it—a tall, proud stag grazing near a cluster of fallen logs.

Gili drew his bow, squinting down the shaft of his arrow. He held his breath and loosed. The arrow whistled through the air but missed the stag's head, striking its back leg instead.

The stag let out a pained cry and bounded away, limping badly.

"Shite!" Gili cursed, lowering his bow. "Caught it in the leg. It won't get far, but I hate makin' the poor beast suffer."

"No matter," Orin said, clapping him on the shoulder. "We'll track it. Finish what we started."

They moved quickly but quietly, following the blood trail through the underbrush. Half an hour passed before they found the wounded deer again, slowed to a pitiful stagger.



"Now," Pula said under his breath, gripping his spear.

Together they closed in, and with swift, sure strikes, they ended the stag's suffering. Gili whispered a short blessing to the old gods of the hunt before they set to work.

They tied the stag's legs together and slung it across a thick branch, hoisting it between them. Grunting and sweating, they hauled the heavy load back to Birchgrove, the weight balanced between their broad shoulders.

Back home, Gili wasted no time. He skinned the deer cleanly and stretched the hide out on a drying rack. Over the coming days, he worked it carefully, curing it and softening it until it was supple and strong. At last, he laid it across the floor of his living room, covering the old wooden planks with rich, dark fur.

"Feels almost like a chieftain's hall now," Gili muttered, admiring his handiwork.

Meanwhile, Sif had been visiting more often. She'd washed away every last stain of the werewolf's blood from Gili's house and took to tending his wound with a kind of quiet devotion. Each day she would check the healing, applying more herbal salve and wrapping it fresh.



"You heal well, Gili," she said one afternoon, dabbing the wound with gentle hands. "Tougher than a stubborn oak."

Gili smiled. "Always said stubbornness was my best trait."

Sif laughed, a soft, warm sound that filled the room better than any fire.

The two grew closer with every passing day. Sif would linger after treating his wound, sitting by the fire, cooking meals, sharing stories. Gili found himself smiling more, feeling a lightness he hadn't known since Thornwood fell.

Orin noticed, of course. One evening he leaned over Gili's shoulder at the firepit, grinning broadly.

"Might have to build Sif a house next to yers," Orin teased, elbowing him in the ribs. "Or better yet, move her in proper!"

Gili rolled his eyes but didn't deny it, and the sparkle in Sif's eyes whenever she looked at him told him she didn't mind the idea either.

Weeks passed, and one cold night, after a long day of tending gardens and checking the flocks, Sif stayed a little longer than usual. As the fire died low and the stars winked through the window, she slipped into Gili's arms. No words were spoken; none were needed. Their hands found each other in the dark, and they made love there, wrapped in warmth and simple belonging.

When morning came, Gili woke with Sif curled against him, her head on his chest, her breath slow and peaceful. He held her tighter, a rare and quiet happiness settling deep in his bones.

Orin offered no teasing that morning, just a knowing nod as Gili and Sif passed him on the way to the fields.

Later that day, Gili took Sif fishing down by the river. The two sat together on a smooth rock, lines in the water, chatting easily about life, plans for the next harvest, and maybe even building another room onto Gili's house.

"Reckon I'll need more space if you keep bringin' over baskets of bread and hides and herbs," Gili said with a grin.

Sif laughed and flicked a pebble at him. "Maybe I'll just take over your kitchen and save myself the trouble."

They caught three fat fish before noon. Sif cooked one that evening for Gili, seasoning it with wild herbs and roasting it over his hearth. She took the other two to her parents, who welcomed the gift with smiles and claps on her back.

As Gili leaned back in his chair, ale mug in hand, he thought how far Birchgrove had come. From a lonely field by the river to a village full of life, laughter, and now—something he hadn't dared hope for—a future.

The winter faded like a dream, leaving behind the warm breath of spring that stirred the fields and kissed the village awake. Birchgrove stretched and grew with the season, just like its people.

Each morning, Gili and Sif woke together, wrapped in each other's warmth. Their bond had only deepened through the winter. By day they worked the fields side by side, preparing the soil for the next barley planting, and by night, they shared sweet love beneath the thick hides of Gili's bed. The world outside could rage or freeze, but inside their little home, there was only warmth.

It wasn't long before Sif started walking slower, her hands resting often on her belly. One evening by the fire, after a simple dinner of roast fish and barley bread, she gave Gili a soft smile.

"I'm with child," she said quietly, her hand resting protectively over her stomach.

Gili nearly dropped his mug. His eyes widened and he let out a bark of laughter, grabbing her hands in his rough, calloused ones.

"By the stones and stars, ye mean it?!" he exclaimed.

Sif laughed too, leaning her forehead against his. "Aye. You'll be a father come autumn."

From that moment on, Gili barely let her lift a finger. Every day he brought her whatever he could gather—plump berries, fresh eggs, fish from the river, even extra slices of the village's best bread. He took pride in seeing her cheeks grow rosy and her belly round with the growing life inside.

Still, there was work to be done. Gili spent long days down in the pits with Orin, swinging his pickaxe until his muscles burned. The iron and coal were strong in the earth, and the village needed more for tools, for hearths, for nails. Pula and Balric joined them when the fields allowed, their laughter echoing down the narrow shafts of the mine.

One evening, after dragging a cart full of coal back to the forge, Gili wiped the soot from his face and leaned on his pick.

"I've been thinkin'," he said. "We ought to build a place where the whole village can gather—bigger than the firepit, with walls and a roof. A common house."

Orin leaned back, rubbing his chin. "Aye, that's a fine idea. Somewhere to drink, talk, sing a bit."

Pula clapped his hands together. "And when the storms come again, we won't have to sit cramped around our hearths, each in our own home."

Word spread quickly, and soon every able hand in Birchgrove was setting to work. They felled trees from the forest's edge, cutting thick beams and sawing planks until the clearing buzzed with life. The common house rose fast, built sturdy with thick walls and a wide open hearth at its center.

Inside, they carved a long table from a single massive tree trunk, smoothing it with planers until it shone in the firelight. Benches were built to line the walls, rough but strong, enough to seat every villager and then some.

One bright afternoon, Gili rolled one of his largest ale barrels from his cellar into the new hall. He tapped it with a firm whack of his hammer, and the rich smell of barley brew filled the room.

Orin and Pula got busy crafting mugs from the river clay. They shaped them thick and round, fired them in Orin's forge until they rang like little bells when tapped.

When the work was done, the whole village gathered for the first feast. Children darted between the benches, women carried in steaming pots of stew and platters of roasted birds, and the men clapped each other on the backs, mugs already sloshing with ale.

Gili stood up at the head of the table, raising his mug high.

"To Birchgrove!" he roared. "To the homes we built, the fields we sowed, and the family we've found!"

"To Birchgrove!" the crowd echoed, mugs clashing together, laughter rising like smoke into the beams above.

The night wore on with singing and stories. Orin belted out old miner's ballads in a voice like rolling stones. Pula told grand tales of mythical beasts and lost halls of gold. Even the quiet ones, like Droган's youngest, dared to stand and tell small, brave stories of their new life.

Sif sat by Gili's side, her hand resting lightly on her round belly, her eyes shining brighter than any fire.

Gili wrapped his arm around her shoulders and leaned back, watching the life they had built together, the people who had become his true kin.

In the common house, beneath the carvings and the songs and the roaring hearth, the spirit of Birchgrove grew strong, sure as the stone beneath their feet and the endless stars overhead.

The morning was still and clear when Gili and Orin set out for the pits, the rising sun painting the fields gold. Their breath puffed in the cool air as they talked quietly about the day's work ahead. As they reached the mouth of the mine, Gili slowed his steps, frowning.

"Something's not right," he muttered.

Orin stopped, following Gili's gaze. One of their pickaxes lay snapped in two by the entrance, the shaft splintered and discarded. Worse yet, the neat pile of iron ore they had spent days stacking was gone, leaving only scattered stones and churned-up earth.

There were footprints too—small, clawed, dozens of them leading to and from the pit.

"Thieves," Orin growled, his face darkening. "But who?"

"Who else but goblins," Gili spat. "Cowardly rat-bastards. Not a one of 'em brave enough to face a dwarf straight on."

## **Ore mining**

Still, they needed the ore, and work wouldn't do itself. They set to mining with what tools they had left, Orin cursing low under his breath every few minutes. Gili worked with one eye over his shoulder, the sword Orin had forged never far from his hand since the werewolf night.

Hours passed, the rhythmic ring of pick on stone filling the air. They were so deep in their labor they didn't hear the soft feet creeping up behind them until it was too late.

Mocking laughter rang out suddenly, high and cruel. Gili and Orin turned to find eight goblins, crouched low and wicked, brandishing crude knives and jagged spears.

"Lookit the fat stone-diggers!" one jeered, snapping his jagged teeth.

"Smash 'em! Smash and take!" another cried, brandishing a club.

Gili tensed, gripping his sword. Orin hefted his pickaxe, though he had no real weapon to fight with.

"Eight to two," Gili muttered under his breath. "Shite odds."

The goblins rushed in, screeching like mad beasts. Orin took a savage blow to the head from a club, blood pouring down his temple. He staggered, swinging his pick wildly, barely keeping the goblins at bay.

"Run, Orin!" Gili roared.

Orin, seeing the hopelessness, stumbled back and sprinted toward the village, blood trailing behind him.

Gili swung his sword in a wide arc, catching one goblin across the belly. The creature shrieked and crumpled, but the others swarmed. A club caught Gili's legs, and he crashed face-first into the rocky dirt, the world spinning around him. Blood trickled from a cut on his forehead, blinding one eye.

With a furious growl, Gili scrambled to his feet, hacking once, twice with his sword to keep the goblins at bay, then turned and fled after Orin, cursing every step.

Behind him, the goblins whooped and jeered, dragging another load of stolen ore away into the woods.

Back at the village, Gili burst into the common house, finding Orin with a blood-soaked rag pressed to his head.

"This can't go on," Gili snarled. "We work, we bleed, and they steal it all!"

Orin nodded grimly. "We gather every able hand. We end it tonight."

The village men assembled within the hour, every one of them armed with whatever they could muster—bows, spears, axes, even sharpened sticks. Gili stood at the front, sword gleaming in the fading light, blood still crusted in his beard.

"No mercy," he said. "They come to take what we bled for, we show 'em what it means to cross dwarves."

They moved fast through the woods, boots silent on the damp ground. When they reached the pits, the goblins were there already, snickering over another pile of stolen ore.

Gili gave the signal, and the villagers charged.

Arrows hissed through the trees. Pula felled one goblin cleanly with a shot through the chest. Gili rushed in with his sword swinging wide, knocking aside a goblin spear and driving his blade deep into another goblin's side.

Orin, blood still staining his face, swung a hammer with all his strength, smashing a goblin's knee backward in a sickening crunch.

Pula and Balric fought back to back, spears flashing in the moonlight. One goblin darted in low, stabbing at Pula's leg. He shouted in pain but drove his spear through the creature's throat.

Gili took a knife across his ribs, hissing through gritted teeth, but kept fighting, his sword singing death with every swing. Another goblin lunged, but Gili ducked and stabbed upward, feeling the blade slide home.

The goblins fought savagely, biting and clawing like wild animals, but the dwarves fought with grim, unshakable fury.

Drogan took a deep cut to his shoulder but held his ground, roaring in pain and bashing a goblin to the earth with his shield.

After what felt like hours but could have only been minutes, the goblins broke. Those still breathing turned and fled shrieking into the woods, leaving their dead behind.

The men of Birchgrove stood battered but victorious, bloodied but unbroken.

Gili wiped his blade clean on the grass, looking around at his brothers-in-arms.

"No more thievin'," he said hoarsely. "No more coward's raids."

Orin clapped him on the back, a grim smile splitting his face. "Tonight, we showed 'em that Birchgrove stands."

And in the heart of the wild woods, under a sky full of cold stars, the village of Birchgrove proved that they would not just survive—they would endure.

The weeks after the goblin fight passed in a quiet hum of work. Birchgrove was at peace again, but Gili's mind, never one to stay still for long, began to wander.

One evening, as he sat on the bench outside his house, watching the river glint in the setting sun, a thought struck him like a hammer.

"Gold," he muttered, puffing on his pipe. "Rivers always carried it in the old tales. Why not ours?"

The next morning, he strode over to Orin's forge, finding his old friend hammering out a batch of nails.

"Orin," Gili said, scratching at his beard. "Got a task for ye."

Orin looked up, wiping sweat from his brow. "If it's more ale barrels, ye can wait till harvest."

Gili chuckled. "Nay, not barrels. I need a sieve. Strong mesh, wood frame. I'm thinkin'... searchin' the river for gold."

Orin raised an eyebrow but grinned. "Chasin' dreams, are ye? Well, can't say no to a bit o' treasure hunting."

In two days, Orin handed Gili a stout sieve, its wood rim reinforced with iron bands, the fine mesh strong enough to catch the smallest flecks.

Gili packed a small satchel—some bread, a strip of salted boar meat, and a waterskin filled with his good barley ale. With a whistle to himself, he set off upriver, the morning air cool and full of birdsong.

He chose his first spot carefully, where the river bent and the water slowed, swirling in deep eddies. He waded into the cold water, boots sinking into the mud, and scooped sand and gravel into the sieve.

For hours, he worked, shaking the sieve just below the surface, letting the water wash the lighter earth away. Each time, nothing remained but dull stones and grit.

"Hmph," Gili grunted, sitting heavily on a sun-warmed rock. He pulled his pipe from his belt, packed it, and lit it with his flint. Smoke curled into the afternoon air as he stared at the water. "Maybe this river's got nothin' but fish and mud."

Still, stubbornness was bred into his bones. After a rest and a bite to eat, he returned to the work, sieving until the sun dipped low and the first bats flitted overhead.

At day's end, his pouch was still empty. With a grunt, he hoisted it over his shoulder and trudged home, pipe clenched in his teeth.

The next day, undeterred, Gili rose early and ventured farther upriver. The land grew rockier here, the water running faster and clearer. He eyed the larger boulders scattered along the banks.

"Gold likes to hide," he said aloud to the river. "Maybe behind one o' ye fat stones."

He turned a boulder over with a grunt of effort, sending crabs and small fish scattering. He filled his sieve with the coarse sand beneath it and swirled it in the current.

As the heavier bits settled, his eyes caught a glimmer—a tiny pellet, no bigger than a barley grain, but unmistakably gold.



"Aha!" Gili crowed, grinning wide. He scooped the tiny treasure into his pouch with a reverence usually reserved for rare relics.

With renewed spirit, he worked for hours, resting now and then to smoke or eat, sitting atop river stones with his boots dangling into the water. The river sang its endless song, and Gili felt part of it, one more stubborn stone among many.

Later in the afternoon, after more sieving, another small pellet surfaced, gleaming against the grey sand.

"Ye sly old river," Gili muttered, dropping the find into his pouch. "Hide it all ye want, I'll pull every last bit from yer belly."

Satisfied, he returned home as the sky blushed pink with sunset. That evening, he sat by his fire, carving a small wooden box from leftover planks. He shaped it carefully, smoothing the edges with his planer, and carved runes around the lid—symbols of fortune and endurance.

"This'll hold me treasure," he said, setting the box proudly on a shelf by his bed.

Afterwards, he spent time in the garden, weeding around the early barley sprouts and checking the vegetable beds. He hauled buckets of water from the well, the cool drops splashing against his boots as he worked.

Sif wandered over, her hands resting lightly on her growing belly.

"Found any treasure today?" she asked with a teasing smile.

Gili wiped his hands on his trousers and grinned. "Aye, a bit. Enough to fill a thimble. But it's a start."

She laughed, reaching out to smooth a strand of hair from his forehead. "You're stubborn as a rock, Gili. That river won't stand a chance."

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Stubborn's what built this village, lass. And stubborn's what'll find us gold."

Together, they sat in the twilight, sharing a simple meal, talking of the future, and watching the stars blink into the darkening sky above Birchgrove.

The morning sun broke over Birchgrove, warm and golden, as Gili rubbed the sleep from his eyes and sat on the edge of his bed. He stretched, bones popping, and stared thoughtfully at the wooden box on the shelf—the one he'd made for his small treasures.

"Time to stretch me legs a bit," he muttered, scratching his beard. "See what's out there beyond the trees."

He set about loading his wagon, working with calm precision. He packed two crates of vegetables—potatoes, carrots, fireleek bulbs—alongside a few finely crafted tools Orin had made: a saw, a hammer, and a planer. He tossed a full sack of last season's barley into the back, along with a sturdy bucket of his home-brewed ale, sealed tight with a lid and rope. Lastly, he tucked a small pouch of silver coins into his belt—the last of his hidden treasure from Thornwood, kept for just such a need.

By mid-morning, Gili was rolling out of Birchgrove, reins in hand, the mule clopping steadily down the dirt road.

He traveled for a full day, passing under the waving green of the trees, crossing shallow brooks, and stopping only once for a quick meal of bread and cheese by a shaded bend in the road. As the sun lowered toward the hills, the village of Osyrn came into view—a scattering of stone and timber houses with smoke curling from their chimneys, fields stretching out in all directions.

He spotted villagers working in the fields, humans mostly, their faces ruddy from sun and soil. Gili guided his mule toward an older woman tending a patch of cabbages.

"Good day to ye," Gili called, tipping his cap. "I'm from Birchgrove. Lookin' to barter a bit, if any folk here have a mind for it."



The woman straightened, wiping her hands on her apron. "Ye'll find folks ready enough, dwarf. Tools, food, drink—folk here are always lookin'."

She waved toward a few men loading hay into a cart nearby. They glanced over and, seeing Gili's wagon, approached with interest.

One tall, broad-shouldered man eyed the tools Gili laid out on a cloth by the wagon.

"This saw," he said, picking it up and testing the edge. "Best make I've seen this season."

Gili grinned. "Made by Orin Stonefoot. Finest smith this side of the river, and that's no idle boast."

The men haggled a bit, but it was friendly, and soon they agreed on a fair price: twelve silver coins for the saw, hammer, and planer together.



"Done and done," Gili said, shaking hands and pocketing the jingling coins.

One of the younger men sniffed the air and pointed to the barrel lashed to the wagon. "What's that smellin' sweeter than honey?"

"Barley brew," Gili said proudly, tapping the side of the bucket. "Brewed it meself back in Birchgrove."

They insisted on tasting it. Gili filled a few clay mugs and passed them around. After a few hearty swigs and broad smiles, they quickly decided they wanted the whole bucket.

After some more quick bargaining, they agreed to pay five silver for the entire batch of ale, a fine price that made Gili's purse noticeably heavier.

With his goods sold and a bit of silver in hand, Gili decided to turn some of it into something more valuable. He asked around the village square and soon found a farmer willing to sell livestock.

A sturdy, brown-eyed cow and a sprightly bull calf stood tied to a post behind the farmer's barn.

"Fine beasts," Gili said, looking them over, checking their teeth, feeling the solid weight of their flanks. "But fifteen silver's a heavy hand."

The farmer, an older man with a face like worn leather, shrugged. "Good stock ain't cheap. Milk, meat, calves later on. Ye'll get yer worth."

Gili grumbled and haggled, but in the end, he slapped fifteen silver coins into the man's calloused palm and tied the cow and calf to the back of his wagon.

"Ye drive a hard bargain," Gili muttered as he loaded them up, "but so do I."

The journey home took a full day. He let the mule plod at an easy pace, stopping near a willow tree by a stream to water the animals and eat a quiet meal of dried meat and river apples.

He leaned back against the wagon, pipe clenched between his teeth, watching the clouds drift slowly overhead.

"Not a bad day's work," he mused aloud. "Not bad at all."

As the sun dipped low once more, painting the fields gold, Gili rolled back into Birchgrove, a satisfied man with new life tethered to his wagon and fresh hopes for the growing village.

The morning dawned bright and clear, a soft breeze stirring the fields as Gili stood in the doorway of his house, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching Sif lead the cow to a shaded spot near the well. The calf, full of restless energy, kicked and hopped about on its short legs.

"Best get a taste of what all that silver bought us," Gili said with a grin, handing Sif two clean buckets.

Sif chuckled and settled herself on a low stool beside the cow, speaking softly to it as she worked. With careful, practiced motions, she milked the cow, the warm, creamy liquid streaming into the buckets. By the time she finished, her arms ached slightly, but she had two full buckets, brimming with fresh milk.

Inside the house, she set about making cheese. She poured the milk into a large clay pot, set it near the hearth where it was just warm enough, and added a little rennet—some she had saved from herbs collected the previous season. As the milk curdled and separated, Sif stirred

it slowly, humming a soft tune. She strained the curds through a clean cloth, tying it up and hanging it from a beam so the whey would drip away.

"Tomorrow," she said, smiling over her shoulder at Gili, "we'll have fresh cheese ready for the whole village."

The rest of the milk was poured into pitchers and shared among the families of Birchgrove, who welcomed the rich, creamy drink eagerly, praising the cow as one of the finest gifts to come in many moons.

Meanwhile, Gili's restless spirit stirred again. He packed his small satchel with bread, a waterskin of ale, his sieve, and a pickaxe. After a rough kiss on Sif's cheek and a playful pat to her rounded belly, he set off upriver, this time pushing deeper into the more mountainous land where the river narrowed and grew rocky.

The walk was longer, harder, the sun beating down through thin clouds, but Gili pressed on. By midday, he reached a bend where the water foamed white against jagged stones. Here he dug into gravel banks, swinging his pick into the softer rock, sifting sand and broken stone through his sieve.

Hours passed. His back ached, his hands grew sore, and still he found nothing but grit and pebbles. He wiped his brow with a grunt, sitting on a mossy rock to catch his breath, pipe dangling from his mouth.

"Stubborn river," he muttered, striking a flint to relight his pipe. "Got gold hidden like a miser hidin' coin under his bed."

He dug again, sifted again—and finally, after what felt like the hundredth try, he saw it: a pea-sized nugget, dull but unmistakable, glinting faintly in the bottom of the sieve.

"Ha! There ye are, ye sly bastard!" Gili crowed, snatching it up and holding it to the light.

He searched a few hours more but found nothing else. As the sun sank lower, he turned for home, boots heavy but heart lighter.

Back in Birchgrove, he placed the nugget carefully into his small carved box, running a calloused thumb over the rough gold.

"Better luck next time," he said, closing the lid with a soft thump.

He led the cow and calf to the mule barn, setting aside a clean, dry corner for them. They settled quickly, the cow munching contentedly on a pile of hay while the calf nosed around curiously.

Next, Gili fed the birds in the pens, tossing handfuls of cracked barley and chopped greens into the scratching, clucking mass. He plucked a basketful of ripe fruits from his trees—apples, rivergold, and thornplums—setting them by the hearth for Sif to sort later.

Finally, Gili descended into the cool depths of his cellar, drawing a mug of fresh, cold ale from one of the large barrels. He carried it outside and sat heavily on his bench, pipe smoke curling around his head, watching the last light of the day fade to dusk.

After a time, he stood, taking his ale with him, and made his way to the shrine behind the house. The stones stood silent and strong under the deepening blue sky. Gili knelt before them, placing the mug carefully on the grass, and bowed his head.

In low, reverent Dwarvish, he spoke:

"Khazâd gund, khazâd baruk,  
Stone guard our hearths, steel guide our hands.  
Give strength to shield, give gold to seek,  
And let our roots dig deep as mountains' bones."

The wind stirred gently through the trees, carrying his prayer away into the darkening sky. Gili rose, feeling a quiet peace settle over him. He took a long pull from his ale, smacked his lips, and smiled.

"Aye," he said to the gathering stars. "This is a good life."

The sun rose on a cloudless morning, golden and bright over Birchgrove. It was a perfect day for hard work, and the whole village was ready for it.

Gili, scythe slung over his shoulder, marched with the others out to the long fields beyond the barley plots. Men and women alike lined up side by side, blades flashing in the sunlight as they swung through the thick summer grass. The sharp rhythmic hiss of the scythes cutting through the hay filled the air, a music of honest labor.

Sif worked nearby with a few of the other women, gathering the fallen hay into neat stacks, tying them with twine.

Gili grinned, wiping sweat from his brow. "Feels like we're shearin' the earth itself," he called out to Orin, who was hacking away a bit farther down.

Orin laughed, his scythe slicing a clean path. "Aye! And this earth's wearin' a thick coat, that's sure."

By the time the sun was heavy in the western sky, the field lay in rows of cut hay, the scent of it sweet and heavy. Everyone sat down in the grass, sharing mugs of cool water and bits of bread, laughing and swapping stories.

Meanwhile, Gili and Orin had another task to finish. They had gathered stout logs earlier in the week, and by midafternoon they set to work building a simple storage building: four thick posts driven into the ground, crossbeams lashed together, and a broad wooden roof laid atop to keep the hay dry through the rains.

By nightfall, the hay was stacked high under the shelter, and the animals—cows, calves, and mules—wandered near it, munching happily. Though many grazed freely during the day, each night, handfuls of hay were set before them to keep them fed and content.

The next day, Gili's mind turned to the village's defense. The goblin attack still lingered fresh in his memory. He spoke with Orin by the forge, sorting through bits of leftover metal.

"Got enough for a few traps," Gili said, nodding to the pile. "Maybe not keep out a whole army, but it'll make sneakin' up on us a dangerous idea."

Orin agreed, hammering out sharp metal points and springs.

Gili set to work with poles and planks, constructing traps at the edges of the village. Simple spring-snares hidden under leaves that would yank an unlucky foot into the air. Pit traps lined with sharpened stakes, camouflaged with grass and branches. Swinging logs triggered by tripwires that would knock a foe flat if they weren't watching their step. "Let 'em come again," Gili muttered to himself, hammering a spring into place. "This time, they'll be the ones bleedin'."

A few days passed, the air growing hotter, and Gili had another idea gnawing at the back of his mind. "Flour," he said aloud one morning while eating with Sif. "Folk don't want barley grains much, but everyone needs flour."

He wasted no time. Gili gathered the men of the village and explained the plan: to build a mill by the river, using the strong current to grind their harvest. Together they hauled large stones, sweating and grunting as they rolled them into place along the riverbank. They packed the stones with clay, fetched fresh from the riverbanks, and built a firm foundation.

Next came the wooden frame—broad beams raised high, walls braced strong. Over two weeks of steady labor, the millhouse took shape. The vanes for the grinding mechanism were crafted carefully, Gili and Pula working side by side to shape the paddles from wide planks.



At last, they constructed the waterwheel, anchoring it to the river's flow. When it began to turn, creaking and splashing, the villagers cheered.

"We've built somethin' that'll feed us long after we're gone," Gili said, smiling wide.

The first bags of grain were ground into flour a few days later, and Gili could already smell the warm bread baking in his mind.

Not one to waste time, Gili decided to make another trade run to Osyrn. He loaded his wagon with a fresh barrel of ale, some dried herbs, and a few tools.

The journey was peaceful, and when he rolled into Osyrn, familiar faces waved him over.

The same broad-shouldered man from before clapped Gili on the back. "Back again, dwarf? What treasures have ye brought this time?"

"Finest ale in three valleys," Gili said, tapping the barrel proudly.

The men tasted the ale, smacked their lips, and soon Gili had bartered for two strong sheep—a ram and a ewe, young and lively.

The deal cost him six silver coins and a half-bucket of ale, a fair bargain by any measure.

Leading the sheep tied behind the wagon, Gili made the long ride home, stopping once to eat a bit of jerky and smoke his pipe under the shade of a willow.

Back in Birchgrove, the villagers gathered to admire the new additions.

"We'll be needin' more pens soon," Pula said, scratching his beard. "Mules, cows, now sheep. Birchgrove's growin' faster than a spring river."

Gili grinned as Sif came to stand beside him, her hand resting on her belly.

"Aye," Gili said, watching the fields stretch out green and golden before him. "And we'll not stop here. There's a whole world yet to carve out of these wilds."

The days in Birchgrove flowed like a steady river. The cow and bull had mated, and soon the promise of new life stirred in the fields. The two sheep Gili had brought back were paired as well, their flock beginning to grow with careful tending. The bird pens, once small and simple, now teemed with over forty clucking, bustling creatures, giving a bounty of fresh eggs each morning.

The villagers, seeing their prosperity, widened the bird pens and added an extension to the barn to house the growing number of sheep alongside the mules and cows. Every evening, laughter and the smell of roasting meats filled the village air—Birchgrove had never known such plenty.

Yet Gili, restless as always, still felt the call of the river and mountains whispering to him. He packed his kit—sieve, pickaxe, sword, a bundle of food, and a thick blanket—and set off

upstream again, climbing higher where the river's waters rushed cold and fierce against stone.

He worked tirelessly, day after day, digging and sieving at bends and eddies, turning over rocks, and panning gravel where the river slowed. Sometimes he stayed out for several nights, sleeping rough beneath the stars, his sword never more than an arm's reach away. After the werewolf attack, Gili swore he'd never be caught unarmed again—anywhere.

One night, camped near the foot of the mountain where the river tumbled down in falls and pools, Gili settled himself under his blanket. The stars blinked down like cold eyes, and the whisper of the river lulled him into a shallow, uneasy sleep.

A sound woke him—soft, strange, almost like stone sliding against stone. Gili's eyes snapped open. His hand closed instantly on the hilt of his sword.

From the gloom near the riverbank, two shapes slunk into view. Shaggy, stone-colored beasts, low to the ground, their yellow eyes gleaming in the dark. Dust Howlers.

"By the black beard of Moradin," Gili muttered, rising to his feet, sword drawn.

Before he could move further, both beasts inhaled deeply and exhaled great clouds of fine, choking dust. The air turned thick and blinding. Gili coughed, swinging his sword wildly to keep them at bay. He tried to blink through the dust but his vision went white, blind.

"Stone-cursed bastards!" Gili roared.

He stumbled, back toward the rock wall of the river bend, squinting hard. His training kept him steady even through the blindness. He heard the soft padding of claws—then a snarl, and the snap of jaws near his arm.

He lashed out, his sword whistling through the air. Luck was with him—a sharp yelp followed and a spatter of warm blood hit his arm.

The dust began to clear. Gili saw one Dust Howler limping, blood matting its shaggy coat, while the other circled, teeth bared.

He gritted his teeth. "Come on then, ye filthy curs."

The uninjured one lunged first, fangs flashing. Gili sidestepped, parrying the creature's leap with the flat of his blade, then counterattacked with a brutal downward chop. His sword bit deep into the beast's shoulder, and it crumpled, yelping in agony.

The second Howler, wounded but maddened with pain, lunged again. Gili barely sidestepped in time, feeling claws rake across his thigh. He grunted in pain but kept his footing. The beast turned to circle him, trying again to find an opening.

"Yer not gettin' another breath, mutt," Gili snarled, blood dripping down his leg.

With a roar, Gili stepped forward and drove his sword straight through the Howler's side, skewering it clean. The beast howled weakly and collapsed at his feet, twitching once before going still.

Gili stood panting, sword dripping with blood, dust coating his hair and beard in a fine gray layer.

"That'll teach ye to mess with a dwarf sleepin' in the wilds," he muttered, wincing as he wiped his blade on the beast's shaggy coat.

He checked himself—one nasty scratch across the thigh but nothing too deep. He rinsed it clean with cold river water and bound it with a strip of cloth from his pack.

The rest of the night, he slept with one eye open, sword across his chest.

As the first pale light of morning touched the mountains, Gili sat up, stretched stiffly, and packed his gear.

"Next time," he grunted, throwing his pack over his shoulder, "maybe I bring a bloody tent and a few more swords."

He cast one last glance at the dead Howlers, then turned toward the winding river, heading back to Birchgrove, where work, love, and a home worth fighting for waited.

The winds shifted warmer over Birchgrove, and the fields swayed green and thick with life. It was Gili's idea first, standing by the common house one evening with a mug of ale in his hand.

"We've seen goblins once, and Dust Howlers not far," he said, looking around at the gathered men. "It's time we keep our hands sharp, not just our axes."

The idea caught quickly. That very week, all the men—Pula, Orin, Balric, Droган, and even a few of the older boys—gathered in the open field behind the common house with staves, spears, and blunt swords.

They spent hours sparring, teaching each other what they knew. Gili showed how to parry low strikes; Orin, laughing, demonstrated how to throw a man by his belt; Pula taught quick footwork to avoid heavy blows.

"Better a bruised shoulder today," Gili said, clashing sticks with Pula, "than a grave tomorrow."

From then on, every week they met for training, growing stronger and faster, a small militia for the little village, ready for whatever threats the wild might throw at them.

The days passed rich with work. One bright morning, Gili took shears to the sheep, their thick wool heavy in the warming weather. It was a simple, slow task, and he talked to the animals as he worked.



"Hold still now, ye daft creature," he muttered, laughing as one sheep tried to wriggle away. "You'll thank me when the sun's beatin' on yer back."

The wool was gathered, cleaned, and stored away, a treasure for winter clothes and blankets. Weeks later, the sheep rewarded their care by birthing three sturdy lambs, their thin legs wobbling as they took their first steps in the fresh grass.

Not long after, the cow birthed twin calves, strong and lively, prancing about the barn like they owned the place.

Birchgrove grew not just in people, but in flocks and herds too.

Meanwhile, Gili still had gold fever burning in his blood. Whenever he could, he packed his sieve and pickaxe and made the long trek back to the mountain foot. He spent days there, sleeping rough again, sifting sand, turning stones. His patience was finally rewarded: two more pea-sized nuggets of gold, glinting against the black sand like stars caught in his hand.

With a grin stretching under his beard, Gili packed up his finds and headed back to Birchgrove.

"I'll not be sittin' on me arse while the land has more to give," he muttered, packing a wooden cage with a handful of healthy birds, a few sacks of flour from the new mill, and a small cask of ale into his wagon. Carefully, he tucked the three gold pebbles into a small leather pouch tied tight at his belt.

He set out early, the mule clopping along the familiar road to Osyrn.

When he arrived, the merchants greeted him warmly. They tasted his ale, poked curiously at the lively birds in their cage, and nodded appreciatively at the fine white flour he laid out for trade.

"What brings ye this time, dwarf?" asked a thick-bearded trader leaning on a wagon.

Gili grinned. "Lookin' for a horse. Strong one. Got gold to spend if the beast is worth it."

The traders showed him a few sorry nags first, but Gili crossed his arms and shook his head.

"Don't insult me," he said. "I want a worker, not a bag o' bones."

Finally, they led out a fine brown mare, broad-shouldered and steady-eyed. Gili circled her, checking hooves, teeth, and muscle.

"She's yours," the trader said, "for the birds, the flour, half the ale... and two of those gold pebbles ye carry."

Gili haggled fiercely—arguing over the strength of his mule, the sweetness of his ale, even the sparkle of his flour—but in the end, they struck a deal he could live with. The horse was his.

He hitched the mare to his wagon, gave her a scratch behind the ear, and whispered, "We'll work wonders together, girl."

Back in Birchgrove, weeks passed in a warm haze of life. The fields grew thick, the lambs grew bold, and the new calves pushed each other about like rowdy children.

One evening, under a pale silver moon, Sif went into labor. Gili stayed close, pacing like a trapped bear outside their home while Bruni and Elva tended to her inside.

Finally, after what felt like an age, Bruni came to the door, smiling.

"Ye have a daughter," she said simply.

Gili rushed inside, his heart hammering harder than it ever had in any battle. There, in Sif's arms, lay a tiny bundle of life, wrapped in soft cloth, eyes closed, a tuft of dark hair poking out.

Sif looked up at him, tired but beaming.

"Come meet your daughter," she said softly.

Gili dropped to his knees beside the bed, reaching out a hand as if afraid to touch something so small and perfect.

"What shall we call her?" Sif asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Gili smiled, a tear streaking unashamedly down his cheek.

"Let's call her Branna," he said. "Strong as the mountains. Bright as the river."

And with that, another new life took root in Birchgrove, binding Gili to the land he had carved from wildness, a land that now had a future as rich and fierce as the heart that beat in the tiny chest of his daughter.

The warm breath of spring rolled over Birchgrove, stirring the fresh green leaves and carrying with it the scent of turned earth. It was time again for the life of the fields to wake.

Gili stood on the edge of his old fields, arms crossed, the rich black soil stretching out before him. He nodded to himself, a grin creeping across his face.

"Time to stretch our boots a bit wider," he said, slapping the flank of his new horse, who snorted and stomped a heavy hoof in agreement.

Orin, coming up the path with a shiny new plow glinting in the sunlight, waved a hand.

"Built her strong and sharp," Orin said, setting the plow down with a heavy thud. "Should cut the earth clean as a blade through butter."

Gili grasped the handles and admired the craftsmanship. "Fine work, Orin. We'll turn the land till it cries for mercy."

He hitched the horse to the plow and got to work. Day after day, he carved long furrows into the earth, his muscles straining, sweat pouring off him under the bright sky. Every evening he returned to the village aching but satisfied, the new fields growing wider with every pass.

By week's end, the soil lay ready. The villagers gathered, sacks of seed over their shoulders. Together they sowed the fields, barley flying from practiced hands in wide arcs. Gili also had half a sack of wheat he'd bartered in Osyrn, a precious crop that promised rich bread come harvest.

"Plant it deep and plant it true," Gili called out, tossing handfuls of seed. "We'll feast like kings by the year's end!"

Once the sowing was done, Gili turned his attention to another important task. He hauled last year's barley into the cellar and began brewing once more. The familiar, comforting work of soaking, sprouting, roasting, and boiling filled his days. After weeks of careful tending, he had stacked eight great barrels full of thick, golden ale.

One evening, alone in the cool dampness of the cellar, Gili tapped a barrel, filled a heavy mug to the brim, and downed it in one mighty gulp. Ale dripped from his beard as he slammed the mug onto the table.

"By the gods, that's proper!" he roared, laughing and croaking like some wild beast.

Feeling light and full of cheer, he scooped up little Branna from her cradle, wrapped her snugly, and joined Sif for a walk down by the river. The world was soft with the glow of sunset, and the river whispered its endless song. They walked slowly, Gili pointing at the flowers and fluttering birds for Branna's wide, curious eyes.

"One day," Gili said, smiling at Sif, "this river will tell stories about the dwarf girl who learned to swim before she could walk."

Sif laughed, her hair catching the golden light. "Aye, and they'll say her Da was the loudest croaker that river ever heard."

Life in Birchgrove flowed steady and full. Some days, Gili joined Orin at the pits again, digging deep into the earth to pull out more iron ore and black, dusty coal. Their carts groaned under the weight, but the village needed every bit.

Orin's forge never cooled now. He hammered and shaped from morning till night, forging tools that built the village's future.

One afternoon, as sparks flew from the forge, Gili leaned against the wall and watched.

"You ever think ye'd be buildin' a kingdom one nail at a time?" Gili said, puffing his pipe.

Orin laughed, slamming his hammer down with a ringing clang. "Better than diggin' graves. Here, we're makin' things that live."

Orin wasn't just making scythes, hammers, saws, and nails anymore. He crafted new things for defense too: sharp metal spearheads that gleamed in the sun, arrows tipped with strong iron points, wooden shields reinforced with thin plates of steel.

The strongest men of Birchgrove—Pula, Balric's sons, and Drogan—received helmets, rough but sturdy, beaten into shape by Orin's powerful hands.

"We'll not be caught unready," Orin said, handing Gili a small, thick shield of oak wrapped in iron.

Gili took it, feeling its weight and balance.

"Aye," he said, testing the grip. "Let any who dare cross Birchgrove find steel waitin' for 'em."

The village, once just a dream by the river, now stood proud: fields wide with promise, barns full of life, workshops busy with fire and iron. And at its heart, a people strong as the stones they had raised, ready for whatever the wild world had left to throw at them.

The sky was a high sweep of blue, clouds like lazy ships drifting over the mountains. Gili had spent the better part of the morning working the river's edge, high up along the rocky path that twisted toward the mountain's foot. He dug and sifted tirelessly, hands raw, sweat pouring down his brow under the heavy sun.

No gold, not a glimmer.

With a grunt, he finally tossed his sieve aside and slumped down onto a patch of grass. His whole body ached. He pulled out his pipe and lit it, letting the smoke drift lazily into the breeze. From his pouch he unwrapped a small chunk of cheese and some coarse bread, biting into them hungrily and washing it down with a deep pull from his waterskin, heavy with ale.

He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the river's endless song, feeling the warm earth beneath him. Peace settled around him like a blanket.

But not far off, something else stirred.

A black bear, its coat dark as night and shaggy with the dust of the hills, sniffed the air. It caught the scent of the dwarf—sweat, smoke, and food—and a low growl rumbled from deep in its chest. The beast, a creature of legend and terror among hunters, massive and battle-scarred, began pacing toward the source of the smell.

Gili opened one eye lazily, the sound of the growl finally reaching his ears. He froze, the bite of bread halfway to his mouth.

"Stone's beard," he muttered.

The bear was already near, standing on its hind legs, towering four times taller than Gili, its eyes wild and furious, the muscles under its thick hide rippling like waves.

Gili, heart hammering against his ribs, slowly reached for his sword, careful not to make any sudden moves. His fingers closed around the hilt, drawing it free with a soft whisper of steel.

The bear let out a deafening roar and lunged.

Gili dodged to the side, barely escaping the first massive swipe of the beast's claws. The ground shook under its weight as it crashed down. Gili swung his sword in a wide arc, catching the bear across its shoulder, but the blade only scored a shallow wound. The bear roared again, swiping with terrifying speed.



Gili tried to dodge, but the bear's paw caught him across the side, tossing him like a sack of grain into the riverbank. Pain exploded through his body, his ribs grinding with every breath. Blood flowed freely from deep gashes on his arms and side.

"Not dyin' today, damn ye," Gili hissed through clenched teeth, staggering to his feet.

The bear lunged again. Gili braced himself, lifting his shield, but the sheer force of the beast's charge shattered the shield into splinters and sent him sprawling into the mud. His sword slipped from his hand, landing a few feet away.

The bear reared back, jaws wide to finish him. Gili, desperate, scrambled through the bloodied dirt, grabbing the sword just as the bear lunged again.

At the last second, with every ounce of strength left in his battered body, Gili drove the sword upward into the bear's thick neck. The blade bit deep, sliding between muscle and bone. The bear let out a choked roar, blood spraying across Gili's face and chest.

The beast staggered, pawed weakly at the air—and then collapsed heavily onto the ground beside him, shuddering once, twice, and then going still.

Gili lay there, panting, his body wrecked and covered in blood—his own and the bear's. His vision blurred, the sky spinning above him.

"Stubborn... stubborn old fool," he mumbled, trying to lift his head.

But strength left him. Darkness closed in, and he passed out on the blood-soaked riverbank, the roar of the river the last thing he heard.

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Two full days passed. In Birchgrove, Sif paced the length of their home, her face pale, her hands trembling.

"He should have been back by now," she whispered, voice breaking.

Orin, hearing her worry, exchanged a grim look with Pula.

"I'll find him," Orin said, grabbing his axe. "No river or beast's gonna take our Gili."

Pula nodded, already slinging his bow across his back. "We'll bring him home."

The two men followed the river trail, searching the banks, calling his name. It was nearly dusk on the second day when Pula spotted something by a cluster of rocks—a smear of blood, a broken piece of a wooden shield.

"Here!" he shouted.

They hurried forward and found him—Gili, unconscious, pale, covered in dried blood, lying half-hidden in the grass. The bear's massive carcass lay nearby, already attracting scavengers.

"By the gods," Orin breathed, kneeling by his friend. "He fought it... he killed it."

Gili barely stirred as they checked him over. His skin was torn, his ribs clearly broken, but he lived—barely.

"Get him up," Pula grunted, already fashioning a rough sling from their cloaks.

They carried him home through the gathering dark, careful but swift, Sif rushing to meet them at the village edge with Bruni and Elva trailing behind.

Sif let out a cry when she saw him, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Put him here, by the fire," she ordered, voice steady despite the fear in her eyes.

She set to work immediately, washing the wounds with clean water, crushing healing herbs into a thick paste to spread over the torn flesh, binding his ribs tightly with clean cloth.

"Hold on, Gili," she whispered, pressing her forehead to his, her tears wetting his battered face. "You stubborn, mad, beautiful fool... hold on."

Orin sat nearby, sharpening his axe slowly, watching over his friend like a silent sentinel.

"Only Gili," he muttered, shaking his head. "Only Gili would take on the mountain itself... and still find a way to come home."

And in the warm, flickering light of the hearth, Birchgrove waited, breathing and living and holding space for the dwarf who would not be broken.

The weeks dragged slowly as Gili lay in the thick furs of his bed, the wounds from the bear deep and raw. Sif hardly left his side. She tended his wounds with gentle hands, applying healing herbs, changing the bandages, feeding him broth and fresh bread. She cared for little Branna too, balancing the work of home and heart with a strength that left Gili in awe even through his pain.

Some days, when the fever dreams clouded his mind, he would wake to find Sif wiping his brow, whispering soft words to soothe him.

"You'll heal, Gili," she said, voice firm. "You're stronger than any beast."

Time wore on, and little by little, the worst of it passed. One afternoon, when the sun shone through the windows and the air smelled of the first barley shoots growing outside, Gili swung his legs off the bed and stood, wincing.

"By the stones," he grunted, clutching the wall for balance. "Feels like I've been trampled by a mountain."

Sif hurried over, steadying him by the elbow. "Easy now," she said. "You've wrestled with death itself. No shame in takin' time."

He managed a few slow steps across the room, gritting his teeth but refusing to let her carry his weight.

A few days later, a knock came at the door. Orin and Pula stood outside, grinning wide, a massive bundle of fur slung between them.

"Look what we fetched for ye, hero," Orin said, thumping the bear's stuffed head down onto Gili's table.

Pula laughed, clapping Gili gently on the shoulder. "Thought ye'd want to see the beast that almost made a legend into a ghost."

Together they mounted the bear's fierce, snarling head on the wall, right next to the boar's. Gili leaned back in his chair, admiring the sight with a deep sense of satisfaction.

"Boar, werewolf, bear," he muttered, puffing on his pipe. "One more and I'll have a whole menagerie."

Word of Gili's survival—and victory—spread through Birchgrove like wildfire. The children whispered stories of the dwarf who bested beasts with nothing but steel and stubbornness. The men, proud and smiling, spoke his name with a kind of reverence.

Soon, Orin, Pula, and the others gathered in Gili's cellar, mugs of dark ale in hand. They clinked their mugs together, the sound ringing out like hammers on anvil.

"To Gili Bearslayer!" Orin roared.

"To Gili!" the others echoed, laughing and drinking deep.

Sif watched from the doorway, a slight frown creasing her brow. After the cheers died down, she pulled Gili aside.

"I know your heart, Gili," she said, touching his cheek. "But ye can't keep temptin' the mountains. One day they'll take more than they give."

Gili hugged her close, feeling the warmth of their child pressed between them.

"I'll be careful, lass," he promised. "I'm not ready to leave this life just yet."

But the fire in his heart had not cooled. A few more weeks of healing, and the pull of the river and stone called him back again.

## **Treasure hunt**

One early morning, with tools slung over his back and a kiss pressed to Sif's forehead, Gili set off up the river trail once more. The sun climbed high as he sifted sand after sand, his muscles aching but his spirit light. Nothing turned up all day. As evening fell, he built a small fire, caught a fat river fish, and roasted it on a spit. He ate slowly, savoring the crisp skin, then leaned back against a boulder, smoking his pipe under a sky smeared with stars.

"Patience," he murmured to the night. "Patience and stubbornness, that's the dwarf's way."

The next morning, as he wandered further along the riverbank, something caught his eye. A small boulder, half-buried in silt. He heaved it aside with a grunt—and there, glinting in the early light, was a gold nugget, larger than anything he had yet found, the size of a plum.

Gili let out a whoop of laughter, stuffing the heavy nugget into his pouch.

"By the gods, this river's got a heart after all!"

Emboldened, he spent the next day digging at the rocky hillsides nearby, swinging his pick with renewed energy. But though he worked hard, no more gold or gems revealed themselves.

Satisfied with his prize, Gili returned home, the nugget tucked safely in his treasure box, resting among the other small, gleaming trophies of his adventures.





Back in Birchgrove, life went on sweet and strong. Gili spent his days close to Sif and little Branna, helping where he could, savoring the simple joys he had fought so hard to protect.

One evening, as the hearthfire crackled and the stars blinked outside, Sif set a fresh loaf of bread on the table beside a wheel of soft, homemade cheese. Pula had gifted them a haunch of boar from a recent hunt, and the smell of the roasted meat filled the house.

Gili carved thick slices, stacking them on slabs of bread, and handed one to Sif.

"To good food, strong drink, and a stubborn heart," he said with a grin.

Sif smiled, raising her mug of ale. "And to the fool who won't let a mountain beast keep him down."

They clinked their mugs together, the firelight gleaming off the gold tucked away safely in the corner of their little home. Life in Birchgrove was hard and wild, but it was theirs—and for Gili Hammerfell, that was more treasure than any river could ever offer.

The morning in Birchgrove cracked open with the sound of hammer on iron. Orin was already at the forge when the first rays of sunlight crept over the village roofs. His shirt was dark with sweat, arms bare and rippling with the effort of his work.

He stood over the anvil, heating a long strip of iron in the roaring fire until it glowed white-hot. With steady, practiced hands, he drew it out, hammering the metal thinner and thinner with rhythmic blows. Sparks flew up around him, dancing like fireflies.

First he shaped arrowheads, sharp and lean, perfect for the new hunters among the village folk. He quenched each one in a barrel of water, steam hissing up with every plunge. After the arrows were done, Orin set to making spearheads, wider and heavier, perfect for guarding the fields and homes against beasts and raiders. He drew out the metal into a flat leaf-shape, folded it slightly to give strength, and hammered the edge razor-thin.

"Nothing makes a man stand taller than a spear at his side," Orin grunted to himself, setting the glowing red head aside to cool.

Next came a hammerhead, for Gili's growing collection of farm tools. He forged it square and balanced, with a slight peen on one side for shaping stone and heavier nails.

Lastly, he worked a scythe blade, long and curved like the crescent moon. The iron resisted him at first, but Orin's arm was relentless. He hammered, shaped, reheated, and hammered again, whispering under his breath.

"Yield, ye stubborn pig-iron. Yield and take a shape worth the gods' breath."

By midday, his forge was hot as a dragon's mouth, but his day's work lay cooling on the benches in neat rows, waiting for handles and final sharpening.

Across the village, Sif moved through the morning's chores with equal purpose. She milked the cow in smooth, steady motions, the warm milk filling the buckets. She carried the pails to the cool shade of the house before making the rounds to the pens.

She tossed feed to the bustling birds, who clucked and pecked greedily. She forked fresh hay into the stalls where the horse and mules nickered in welcome, their ears pricking up at the sight of her.

"There ye go, greedy beasts," she said with a chuckle. "A full belly and no trouble, that's the deal."

At the mill by the river, the other villagers were busy grinding flour. The great waterwheel turned steadily, its wooden gears clattering. Drogan and Balric's sons hauled sacks of barley and wheat up the steps, feeding the grain into the heavy stone grinders. Fine white flour poured out into sacks, a thick dust floating in the air, making them all look like dusty ghosts.

"Don't breathe too deep," Drogan joked, brushing powder from his beard. "Or we'll be coughing bread for a week!"

Meanwhile, Gili had other plans for the day.

He packed his wagon with a few sturdy hides, a bundle of clean, soft wool, two small casks of dark ale, and several sacks of fresh-milled flour. Carefully, he placed his prized gold nugget in a pouch and used a small chisel to cut it into a handful of coin-sized pieces—small enough for easy trading but heavy enough to impress any trader.

"Let's see what the world's got to offer," he muttered, hitching the horse to the wagon.

He set off at first light, the wheels creaking and the sun climbing high into a cloudless sky. After a long day's travel, the village of Sparrowhead appeared on the horizon, nestled between low hills, its houses neat and sturdy.

Gili rolled into the marketplace, the sun gleaming off the wagons and rooftops. Folk turned curious heads at the sight of the dwarf with the heavy wagon and thick arms.

He wasted no time. He set up a rough stall near the well and began bartering. The villagers, mostly humans, bustled around, drawn by the rich scent of ale and the sight of fresh flour and thick hides.

"That's proper stuff," said one broad woman, feeling the softness of the wool between her fingers. "None better this side of the river."

Gili grinned. "Strong as a mule, soft as a babe's arse. Fair price too."

In short order, he sold all his goods, taking silver coins and a few copper trinkets in trade. But his real interest was in growing Birchgrove's flocks and fields.

He found a farmer willing to part with four sturdy goats—two nannies and two young billies. After some hard bargaining and flashing one of his gold pieces, Gili secured the deal.

"Ye won't find better goats this season," the farmer promised, tying the animals snugly to Gili's wagon.

Gili also picked up sacks of seeds—cabbage, onions, peas, and turnips—to diversify the village gardens.

"Can't eat only bread and meat," he muttered, packing the seeds carefully. "Need somethin' green to keep the guts workin'."

Satisfied, he camped by the road that night, cooking a simple meal of dried meat and river apples, the goats bleating softly nearby.

He returned home the next day, the goats surviving the trip without too much fuss, though one managed to nibble a corner of his blanket.

Back in Birchgrove, Gili unloaded the goats into the pen with the sheep, smiling wide as he watched the little herd bumble around, exploring their new home.

He threw them fresh hay, filled the water trough, and leaned on the fence, lighting his pipe.

"Ain't nothin' we can't build here," he said quietly to himself, watching the animals and feeling the warm evening wind at his back. "One stone, one beast, one breath at a time."

And so the roots of Birchgrove dug a little deeper into the earth, carrying the hopes of every hard-swinging hammer and stubborn heart that called it home.

The work began slow, as all hard things do. Gili stood at the edge of Birchgrove, hands on his hips, gazing out at the open land. The idea had been his—building a stone fence to mark and protect their growing village.

“It won’t stop a warband,” he had said to Orin and Pula one evening over mugs of dark ale. “But it’ll give us walls enough to call this place our own.”

The next morning, the whole village got to work. Gili, Orin, Pula, Drogan, Balric’s sons—all took to the task. They spent days hauling stone from the riverbank, loading it onto the wagons, and dragging it back to the village edge. The stones were heavy, slick from the river, and it took all the strength of horse, mule, and dwarf alike to move them.

When they weren’t hauling stone, they dug into the muddy banks to pull out thick, good clay. They mixed it with straw to make a binding mortar, setting each stone atop the next carefully. The wall grew, slow but sure, to a dwarf’s height. It wasn’t a fortress wall, but it made Birchgrove feel tighter, safer—no longer just scattered homes in the wilds, but a true village with boundaries and pride.

Weeks later, the wall stood firm, a ring of stone around their homes, their fields, their hopes.

The pride was short-lived.

One night, under a sharp sliver of moon, Gili was roused by frantic clucking and terrified squawking. By the time he and Sif rushed out into the yard, the damage had been done—four of their birds lay torn and bloody in the pens.

"Wolves," Gili muttered grimly, kneeling beside the torn feathers. "No doubt of it."

By morning, the news had spread through the village. Gili knew they couldn’t afford to lose more stock. It had to be dealt with.

That evening, Gili gathered Orin and Pula at the common house. They geared up with heavy bows, quivers full of arrows, sharp spears, and their trusted swords.

"Best be ready for more than one," Pula said, tightening the straps of his leather armor.

"Aye," Orin grunted, checking the edge on his axe. "Where there’s one wolf, there’s ten."

They left at twilight, following the pawprints through the soft earth, up along the river trail toward the mountains. For hours they tracked the beasts, moving through the darkened woods, the wind whispering through the trees like a warning.

Gili knelt at a muddy patch, examining fresh tracks.

"They’re close," he whispered.

And then they saw it—a flash of grey among the stones. One wolf, prowling near the river’s edge.

"One’s just the bait," Pula muttered low.

Sure enough, the pack revealed itself soon after—twelve wolves, lean and fierce, teeth bared in the moonlight.

"No talkin' our way outta this," Orin growled, lifting his spear.



The wolves circled, low and silent, eyes gleaming. Then the biggest one, a brute of a beast with a scar across its snout, let out a low snarl—and the pack charged.

Gili loosed the first arrow, striking a wolf in the shoulder, sending it spinning. Orin hurled his spear, impaling another that leapt mid-air. Pula let fly a rapid shot that caught a third beast clean through the ribs.

The wolves struck back like a storm. One latched onto Pula's leg, dragging him down into the dirt. Gili sprinted forward, sword flashing, and hacked the wolf's back open, dragging Pula to his feet.

"Thanks," Pula gasped, blood already staining his breeches.

Orin bellowed and swung his axe in wide arcs, forcing two wolves back, but one caught him with a snap of its jaws, tearing a deep gash across his side.

Gili fought like a cornered boar, blade flashing in desperate strikes, ducking and weaving, cutting down another wolf that tried to flank him.

The wolves were relentless. Gili took a heavy bite to his left arm, feeling teeth sink into muscle. With a roar, he slammed his sword hilt into the beast's skull, sending it sprawling.

After what felt like an eternity of blood and chaos, only three wolves remained. Sensing the fight had turned, they fled into the night, tails low, whimpering.

The field was littered with the fallen. Twelve wolves had come—nine now lay dead at their feet.

Gili, Orin, and Pula leaned on their weapons, panting, blood running freely from their wounds.

"That," Orin grunted, wiping his axe clean on a wolf's pelt, "was a bit too lively for my likin'."

Pula staggered over to Gili, pulling a small glass vial from his belt.

"Here," he said, handing it over. "Bruni's healing draught."

Gili nodded gratefully, uncorked it, and drank deeply. The potion's warmth spread through him, easing the worst of the wounds, stopping the bleeding. Orin and Pula followed suit, the color returning slowly to their pale faces.

"Let's not waste these pelts," Gili said hoarsely. "No sense lettin' good fur rot."

They skinned the beasts swiftly, bundling the heavy pelts into their wagon. By dawn, they staggered back into Birchgrove, battered but victorious.

Sif ran to Gili the moment he crossed the wall, her hands trembling. She pulled him into a fierce embrace, feeling the bruises and bandages but needing to know he was real, alive.

"We're gettin' too old for this," Gili muttered, half-laughing, half-crying into her hair.

"You're a fool," she said, clutching him tighter. "But you're my fool."

The villagers gathered around, staring in awe at the bloody pelts piled high in the wagon. Songs would be sung of the night the dwarves of Birchgrove took the fight to the wolves—and won.

The work of life in Birchgrove never slowed, and soon the five founding families—those of Gili, Orin, Pula, Drogon, and Balric—decided to formalize something that had been quietly happening for months. They gathered one evening at the common house, a fire roaring in the hearth, mugs of ale clutched in every hand.

Gili leaned forward, pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Been thinkin'," he said around a puff of smoke, "this watermill's kept all our bellies full and our mugs heavy. It's time we set a proper pact to care for it."

Orin grunted in agreement. "Aye. Can't have it fallin' apart. If it goes, the whole village stumbles."

And so they drafted what came to be known as The Watermill Pact.

Each of the five families would take responsibility for the mill's maintenance one month at a time. Fixing gears, clearing the waterwheel of snags, grinding grain—whatever needed doing, the family on duty saw it done. At the end of each round, all the families would come together for the Millfeast, a grand gathering with food, ale, and contests.

Word spread fast, and excitement ran through the village like wildfire. Everyone, even the children, buzzed about the coming Millfeast.

On the day of the first celebration, tables were dragged out into the green space by the river. They groaned under the weight of fresh bread, stews thick with vegetables, roasted birds, and barrels of ale lined up in proud rows.

The contests were fierce and full of laughter.

Sif, cheeks red with pride, presented a crusty loaf of barley bread that made the judges nod in approval.

Pula's wife, Elva, brought forth a dark, rich ale that set more than one man swaying on his feet after just a mug.

The loudest belch contest was a roaring, laughing mess, with Drogan nearly knocking over a bench with a belch so deep it set the birds in the trees to flight.

In the end, the votes were tallied with great ceremony.

Balric, his chest puffed out like a rooster, was crowned the first "Mill Master," given a thick leather belt with a carved wooden buckle bearing the title in bold, proud letters. He paraded around with it, slapping his belly and grinning ear to ear.

"Next month, it'll be mine," Orin declared, wagging a finger at Balric. "I'll brew an ale so strong it'll knock the whiskers off yer face!"

The villagers roared with laughter, mugs raised high.

Even better, the Millfeast sparked new competition in brewing. Several families took to ale-making with a fiery spirit, experimenting with dark roasts, honeyed ales, and herbed brews. The air around Birchgrove soon smelled almost constantly of yeast and sweet boiling grains.

Gili stood back at the edge of the gathering with Sif at his side, little Branna perched on his shoulders, clapping her small hands at the singing and shouting.

He smiled, feeling the warmth of the fire, the rumble of songs in the air, and the steady strength of his people around him.

"From blood, sweat, and stubbornness," he muttered to Sif, grinning wide, "we've built somethin' worth callin' home."

Sif leaned against him, laughing.

"Aye," she said. "And we've only just begun."

And with the river singing past the stones and the stars thick in the sky, Birchgrove thrived, held together by grit, love, and the binding of the Watermill Pact.

A week had passed since the Millfeast, and life in Birchgrove had returned to its steady rhythm. Yet Gili, ever restless, felt the itch to head back to the river and mountains, seeking gold and whatever fortune he could wrest from the wilds.

That morning, as he packed his satchel and checked his gear, Balric approached him, his broad shoulders stooped slightly with worry. His son Bram, a lad of just past twenty winters, stood quietly at his side, eager but green.

"Gili," Balric said, clearing his throat, "the boy's been bitin' at the bit to see the world beyond the fields. Reckoned... maybe you'd take him along with ye today. Show him the way of stone and river."

Gili looked Bram over, his heart heavy with the weight of such a request. He knew the mountains held danger, but the lad needed to learn the world wasn't all barley and bread.

"Aye," Gili said after a pause. "I'll keep him close. We'll find some stones to crack, maybe a speck of gold if the river's kind."

Balric clasped Gili's arm in thanks, pride flickering in his tired eyes.

With that, Gili and Bram set off, walking the well-worn trail along the river that led up toward the foot of the mountains. The sun rose high and warm, glinting off the water, the earth soft underfoot. Bram was full of questions, his voice lively as he peppered Gili with them.

"How far upstream have ye gone, Master Gili? What's the biggest nugget ye found? Ever see a dragon in the hills?"

Gili chuckled, ruffling the boy's hair.

"One question at a time, lad. And no dragons—only beasts and hard stone. But plenty enough to keep a dwarf's hands busy."

When they reached a promising slope of broken rock and gravel, they set to work with pickaxes, digging and cracking apart the stubborn earth. Hours passed under the climbing sun, and the sweat rolled freely down their backs.

Finding nothing but dirt and shattered rock, Gili finally set down his pickaxe with a grunt.

"I'm headin' to the river to sift a bit. You stay sharp, Bram. Don't wander. Just hack away at this bank here."

"Aye, Master Gili," Bram said, raising his pick once more.

Gili trudged off, boots heavy with dust, humming a low tune to himself. He made it to the river and set to sifting sand through his sieve, eyes sharp for any hint of gold.



Some time had passed and a scream tore through the quiet like a knife.

Gili dropped his sieve and sprinted back up the trail, heart hammering, sword already drawn.

When he crested the hill, the sight froze his blood.



Bram lay sprawled on the ground, his body torn open, blood soaking the stones. His throat was ripped wide, a brutal wound that left no hope. The mountain lion, a sleek ghost of death, darted up a higher slope, vanishing into the rocks before Gili could even think to chase it.

"Bram!" Gili roared, falling to his knees beside the boy.

But it was too late. Bram's wide, lifeless eyes stared at nothing, his young face pale under the blood.

Gili bowed his head, a terrible grief rising in his chest. He closed the boy's eyes with a rough, trembling hand, then lifted Bram's body into his arms. He carried him down the mountainside, the long road home heavy with sorrow.

The sun was setting as Gili entered Birchgrove, every step slower than the last. The villagers, seeing the limp body in his arms, rushed to meet him. Sif, Orin, Pula, all gathered around, their faces tight with dread.

Balric pushed through the crowd, his wife Elva clutching his arm. One look at Gili's face and Balric crumpled to his knees.

"No..." Balric whispered, reaching out to touch Bram's bloodied hair. "No, not my boy."

Elva let out a heart-wrenching wail and collapsed beside her husband, tears streaming down her face.

Gili knelt, laying Bram down carefully. His voice was raw as he spoke.

"I was away at the river. I heard the scream but... it was too late. Mountain lion took him. The lad fought, gods he fought... but it was too much."

Pula and Drogan helped Balric to his feet, guiding him away gently.

The next day, the village gathered at the edge of the forest. Balric and Gili dug the grave together, though Balric's hands shook so hard he could barely hold the shovel. Sif, Elva, and the other women wept quietly as they wrapped Bram's body in a simple white cloth.

When the grave was ready, Balric stood tall, voice steady despite the tears streaming down his face.

"He was strong. He was brave. He wanted to see the world... and he deserved more time."

They lowered Bram into the earth, each villager tossing a handful of soil onto the grave.

At the head of the grave, Gili and Orin erected a stone marker. Gili had carved it himself, rough but proud:

Here lies Bram, Son of Birchgrove. Brave of heart. Strong of spirit. May the stone cradle him and the river sing his name forever.

The villagers stood in silence, the only sound the whisper of the wind through the trees.

Later, as the sun set behind the mountains, Gili sat by the river alone, staring into the water. His heart was heavy with guilt and sadness.

"Forgive me, lad," he murmured to the flowing water. "I should've stayed closer."

He closed his eyes, the river's song carrying Bram's memory into the endless wild.

## Higher Orders

It was a fine, golden morning when the wagon rolled into Birchgrove, kicking up dust as the iron-rimmed wheels clattered over the stones. Two well-fed horses pulled it, their coats shining in the sun. Atop the seat sat a human man, tall and broad, his clothes far finer than any the villagers had seen—a green velvet coat trimmed with gold thread, fine boots, and a polished sword at his hip.

The man climbed down, brushing dust from his sleeves with distaste. His nose wrinkled as he looked around at the simple homes and hard-worn people. Villagers paused their work to stare, unsure what to make of this unexpected visitor.

"Where is the head of this village?" the man called out loudly, his voice carrying a tone of command more suited to a battlefield than a farm.

Kendric, one of Balric's sons, dropped his bundle of firewood and dashed off toward Gili's house.

"Master Gili!" Kendric panted, banging on the door. "There's a fancy man here askin' for ye!"

Inside, Gili was enjoying his morning pipe, the scent of riverweed curling lazily around him. He muttered something foul under his breath, stuck the pipe between his teeth, grabbed his belt, and shuffled out the door.

He approached the wagon slowly, one eyebrow raised, pipe clamped between his teeth.

The man straightened his back even more and offered a short, shallow bow, as if it pained him to acknowledge the dwarf at all.



"I am Roderick," he said, voice dripping with self-importance. "Servant of King Almund, Lord of this county. I am here to register this... new settlement."

Gili gave him a long, flat look and chewed his pipe thoughtfully.

"Well, ye found us," he said. "What d'ye want, beyond makin' yer boots dusty?"

Roderick cleared his throat and pulled a fine leather-bound book from his satchel.

"I require the names of all inhabitants," he said. "Their trades, their produce, and their livestock numbers."

The villagers, muttering among themselves, gathered around the wagon. One by one they gave their names, their families, their work—Pula the hunter, Orin the smith, Sif the herbalist and housewife, and so on. Roderick wrote it all down with exaggerated care, his quill scratching noisily across the parchment.

"And how many here can read or write?" he asked, glancing around sharply.

Silence. Heads turned awkwardly. No one answered but Gili "I can, but only a little."

"Hmph," Roderick sniffed. "Illiterates, of course. No matter."

He flipped a few pages in his book and spoke, voice loud and final.

"In accordance with the King's decree, as you have claimed land in his county, you are obliged to support the Crown and the royal armies. As you possess no silver or gold of note, you shall pay in goods."

He raised a gloved hand, ticking off demands like counting debts.

"Every two sheep born, one shall be surrendered to the Crown. Five sacks of barley per month. And fresh pelts from your hunting."

Gasps and angry mutters rippled through the gathered villagers.

"But we can barely keep enough for ourselves!" Bruni cried.

"We work this land with our own blood and sweat!" Orin bellowed.

Gili stepped forward, pipe smoke trailing from his mouth like a slow storm.

"And what in the nine hells does His Royal Majesty give us in return?" he asked coldly. "No guards to fight off beasts, no hands to build our walls, no coin to fill our bellies."

Roderick gave him a thin, condescending smile.

"You are granted the King's peace and protection simply by living on his land. Consider it a generous arrangement."

Gili spat to the side, missing Roderick's polished boots by inches.

"Generous, my hairy arse."

Despite their grumbling, the villagers gathered the required goods. They dragged out four sacks of barley, tied up a few young pelts from the latest hunt, and selected a healthy lamb to be given up.

With grim faces, they loaded the goods into Roderick's wagon under his smug supervision.

When the last sack was tossed up, Roderick brushed his hands off as if he had just dealt with dirty animals. He mounted his wagon seat and looked down on them all with a smirk.

"Remember," he said, "loyalty to the King is loyalty to your own safety."

With a snap of the reins, he turned the wagon around and rolled back down the road, dust rising in his wake.

The villagers stood in silence for a long moment, the anger thick in the air.

Finally, Gili growled around his pipe, voice low and venomous.

"Bastard comes rollin' in, takes our goods like we owed him the skin off our backs. Next time he comes, maybe he finds the welcome a bit less friendly."

Orin spat in the dirt. Pula tightened his belt. Sif took Gili's hand, her face set and hard.

The people of Birchgrove had built their homes with their own hands, fought off beasts, spilled blood into the earth—and now they'd been reminded that the greatest beasts wore fine coats and spoke of kings and duty.

But they were dwarves and proud folk, human and dwarf alike. Birchgrove would endure. They would find a way. They always did.

The summer sun hung heavy over Birchgrove, a great molten eye that watched without mercy. By midday, the whole village was alive with the hum and clang of work. Every able hand, young and old alike, toiled under its burning gaze.

Out in the fields, Gili and Pula labored side by side, their shirts dark with sweat, soaked clear through to their heavy leather belts. Their boots sank into the soft earth as they hacked at the thick weeds that threatened to choke the barley and wheat. Gili's arms ached from the constant swing of his sickle, each pull sending sharp jolts up his elbows, but he gritted his teeth and kept cutting.

"By the stones, this field's got more weeds than bloody wheat!" Gili barked, wiping his brow with a dirty sleeve, the salt of sweat stinging his eyes.

Pula only grunted, his face red and dripping, thick calloused hands moving without rest.

Beyond them, Sif and Bruni were bent low in the vegetable gardens, backs curved like old bows. They pulled weeds, checked the sprouting cabbages and onions, and tied up the crawling pea plants to thin stakes. Their skirts stuck to their legs, their hair damp and clinging to their faces. Bruni paused once, straightening with a groan, her hand pressing into the small of her back.

"Next child I birth will be born with a hoe in his hand," she joked weakly, earning a tired chuckle from Sif.

At the mill, Drogan and Balric's sons hauled sacks of grain as heavy as their own bodies up the steps. Muscles strained under the loads, faces grimacing, lips pressed thin against the

pain. Dust coated them from head to toe, white as ghosts, only the dark rivulets of sweat cutting paths through the flour.

Inside the smithy, Orin's forge roared like an angry beast. He hammered at red-hot iron, his face blackened with soot, sweat dripping from the end of his beard. Every strike of his hammer was a battle, and the anvil sang with each blow. His hands were raw, knuckles swollen, but still he worked—fashioning new axe heads, repairing old scythes, making iron bands for barrels and wheels.

The animals too needed tending. Kendric and his younger brothers herded the goats, mules, cows, and sheep into the pens, shoveling muck and hauling hay under the relentless sun. Their arms trembled from the effort, their faces shiny with sweat. Even the birds pecking in the pens seemed to wilt in the heat, their feathers puffed and scruffy.

Gili's back screamed for mercy, but he straightened up at the end of a long row, looking around at his neighbors—his kin by blood and by bond. Their faces were red, their hands blistered, their clothes clung to them like wet rags.

He saw Orin pounding metal with the stubborn fury of a mountain, saw Sif wiping her forehead but refusing to slow her careful tending, saw Balric hauling stones to repair a section of the wall with his mouth set in a tight, grim line.

All of them moved with the same quiet, grim purpose. Their bodies hurt. Their bones ached. But none complained. They worked because they must—because no king, no noble, no beast would do it for them.

They were Birchgrove.

"Stubborn, sweaty, glorious bastards," Gili muttered under his breath with a fierce grin, gripping his sickle once more. "We built this with blood, and we'll keep it the same way."

And with that, he bent again to his work, sweat pouring into the earth alongside the seeds of their future.

The morning in Birchgrove broke cool and sharp, a rare gift of breeze rustling through the barley fields. It was the kind of day that called for hard tasks, the kind that would leave a man sore but satisfied.

At the common house, Gili met with Pula over mugs of weak morning ale, a battered parchment spread between them. On it was scrawled in faulty letters the growing list of village needs—plow handles splintering, hammers without proper heft, axes worn to stubs.

"What we need," Gili said, jabbing the list with a thick finger, "is ironwood. None o' this soft birch or willow. We need wood that can take a dwarf's fury and not snap like a twig."

Pula nodded, pulling on his leather boots. "Ironwood grows up the mountain foot, near the old ridges. But it's wild land. Full of things that bite."

Gili grinned, sliding his sword belt over his shoulder. "All the better. Let's take a walk, lad."

By midday, Gili and Pula were marching up the narrow trails that wound into the lower slopes of the mountain. The path was rough, climbing steadily among the rocks and brambles. The higher they went, the thicker and older the trees grew—great gnarled trunks, twisted by wind and years, their bark dark and hard as old stone.

The ironwood trees were rare and stubborn, their grey-brown trunks growing thick and straight. Gili tapped one with the butt of his axe.

"Solid as the bones of the world," he muttered approvingly. He pulled a scrap of cloth from his belt, tying it around the trunk to mark it for cutting later.

They moved carefully, marking a few more trees, always watching the thick underbrush and rocky slopes around them.

"Keep yer eyes sharp," Pula whispered once. "Giant badgers love this land."

No sooner had he said it than a low growl rumbled from a thicket nearby.

From the brush burst a giant badger, its shoulders broad as a mule's, claws thick and yellowed. Its beady eyes locked onto them, hackles rising.

"Bloody stones," Gili barked, drawing his sword.

The badger charged. Pula side-stepped with the nimbleness of a much younger man and loosed an arrow that thunked deep into the creature's shoulder. It barely slowed.

Gili stood his ground, swinging his sword in a wide arc as the beast lunged. The blade bit into thick hide, but the badger slammed into him, knocking him flat on his back.

"Ye fat, hairy bastard!" Gili roared, wrestling the snapping jaws away from his face.

Pula leapt forward, plunging his spear into the badger's side. The beast gave a final shudder, then sagged heavily onto the dirt.

Panting, Gili shoved it off and staggered to his feet, wiping blood from his forehead.

"Next time ye warn me about badgers," he growled at Pula, "do it before one tries to chew me bloody head off."

Pula laughed, clapping Gili on the back.

They pressed on, bruised but unbroken, marking more ironwood trees as the sun climbed higher. Once, Pula spotted a rock snake—a massive, grey-scaled serpent blending near perfectly with the boulders. They gave it wide berth, not eager to test their luck again.

By late afternoon, their belts heavy with cloth markers and their limbs aching, they had marked a good dozen healthy ironwoods.

"That'll see us through winter," Gili said, puffing on his pipe as they sat on a rock overlooking Birchgrove below.

"Aye," Pula agreed. "And it'll keep our tools strong as our backs."

They rested a while longer, letting the mountain breeze cool their sweat-soaked clothes. Below, the village was a scatter of stone and smoke, tiny but stubborn against the wilds.

Gili smiled around the stem of his pipe.

"Built with sweat and fought for with blood. Just the way it should be."

They rose then, and with the last of the sunlight turning the world gold, they made their way back down to Birchgrove, ready to tell their folk that the wood they needed—and the future they were carving—was waiting, strong and steady, on the mountain's bones.

The day had come for a task Gili and Orin had spoken of in quiet, serious tones over many a shared mug of ale. The old shrine near the mountain foot, the one Gili had stumbled upon some months back, weighed heavy in their minds. It was no mere heap of stone—it was a place old as the mountain itself, dedicated to Moradin or perhaps some older spirit of earth and stone that dwarves still honored in their bones.

That morning, Gili and Orin strapped on their belts, shouldered their tools, and set out along the winding paths up toward the mountain. Gili carried a small sack of offerings—fresh barley, a carved wooden token, a flask of rich ale brewed from last season's best harvest. Orin brought tools for patching stone and metal, his hammer and tongs swinging at his side.

The walk was not long, but it was steep and rough. They moved in silence mostly, the crunch of boots on gravel and the low whistle of the wind their only company. When they rounded the last bend and the shrine came into view, they paused a moment in respect.

The shrine stood tucked into the cliffside, half-hidden by overgrowth. Vines had begun to crawl across its base, moss swallowed the intricate carvings along the stone pillars. The metal offering plates, once shining bright, were dull with rust and weather.

Gili knelt before it, setting down the sack gently.

"Looks worse for wear, but she still breathes," he said, voice low.

Orin nodded, pulling his hammer free. "Let's give her back her strength."

They got to work. Gili drew his belt-knife and began cutting away the vines and brush, clearing the carved faces and sacred runes etched into the stone. He worked carefully, washing away the moss with river water brought in a skin, scrubbing until the ancient markings showed clear once more.

Orin set to the metalwork. He stripped the rust from the offering plates with harsh river sand and a wire brush, then beat dents from them over a flat stone. Sparks flew when he heated his portable brazier and hammered some of the loose fittings back into place.

At one point, Gili found a deep crack along the base of the main pillar. He knelt, running his hand along the fissure.



"We'll patch it with river clay and sand," he said. "Strong as stone when it dries."

Together they mixed the clay, smearing it into the crack, smoothing it with flat stones. Sweat poured from their brows, backs aching, hands raw, but they worked with reverence.



When the shrine looked whole again, they stepped back and regarded it in silence. The face of the earth god or spirit—broad and solemn, crowned with leaves and stone—seemed to gaze out stronger now, the shrine no longer a forgotten relic but a beating heart of the mountain.

Gili opened the sack and took out the offerings. He poured a small mound of barley at the foot of the shrine, placed the carved wooden token—a hammer crossed with an ear of barley—and uncorked the flask of ale.

He poured the ale in a slow circle around the shrine, the sweet smell filling the air.

Kneeling, Gili spoke first in the low, rough dwarven tongue:

"Father of Stone, Keeper of Earth,  
We mend what time has worn,  
We bring gift of harvest and craft,  
Bless these fields, bless these flocks,  
And watch over our kin."

Orin joined him, bowing his head, murmuring old words that his father had taught him in the deep halls of his youth.

For a long while they knelt, the wind sighing through the stones, the shrine silent but no longer abandoned.

As they rose, Gili brushed dust from his knees and looked to Orin.

"Feels better, don't it?" he said, voice thick with something heavier than simple satisfaction.

Orin grunted, the corners of his mouth tugging up.

"Aye. Feels like we ain't just buildin' a village. We're buildin' roots."

They turned back toward Birchgrove as the sun sank lower, their shadows stretching long over the rocky path. Behind them, the shrine stood proud once more, the mountain cradling it as it had in the elder days. And in their hearts, Gili and Orin carried the quiet certainty that the spirits of earth and stone had seen their work—and would remember it.

The day had been calm and warm, the fields humming with the lazy drone of insects, the clang of Orin's forge rising now and then like a heartbeat over Birchgrove. Children played near the common house, goats bleated lazily in the pens, and the world seemed, for once, at peace.

But out beyond the edge of the stone wall, hidden by the sparse woods and the tall summer grass, twelve figures crept low to the ground. Bandits, rough men with scars and grim faces, clutching rusted blades, clubs, and bows. They moved in silence, hungry for easy plunder, seeing only simple farmers and low walls.

One of them, a wiry man with a crooked nose, took the lead. He crept forward, scanning for a break in the wall, not watching his feet. With a sharp snap of hidden branches, the earth beneath him gave way and he plunged into a pit lined with sharpened wooden stakes.

The scream that tore from his throat was terrible and long, filled with raw agony.

The village reacted instantly. Gili was at the well, helping Sif draw water, when the scream echoed through the village like a war horn.

"To arms!" he bellowed, tossing the bucket aside. His hand flew to his sword, and he ran for the common house, where their weapons were stored.

The other villagers burst from their homes, faces grim, grabbing shields, spears, bows, and swords. Helmets were slammed onto heads, leather armor hastily strapped on. In moments, Birchgrove stood ready, every able-bodied man and woman forming a ragged, determined line.

Orin, tightening the strap of his helm, handed a shield to Sif, who gritted her teeth and took up a spear.

"They'll not take what's ours," Orin said, voice low and steady.

The bandits, startled but furious, surged forward. With a roar, they poured over the walls, scrambling through the gaps and charging into the heart of the village.

The clash was immediate and brutal.

Gili met the first bandit with a crash of metal, his sword flashing in the sunlight. He ducked under a wild swing and drove his blade up into the man's gut. Blood sprayed, hot and wet, but there was no time to think—another bandit was already upon him.

Orin fought like a bull, swinging his heavy smith's hammer in wide arcs, breaking shields and smashing helmets. Two men fell to him before another managed to sink a dagger into his thigh. He bellowed in pain but kept fighting, his hammer a blur.



Pula loosed arrows from behind a pile of barrels, each shaft finding a mark in the wild chaos.

But not all could be saved.

Selda, brave Selda who had helped weave the cloth for half the village, was surrounded by three bandits near the mill. She stabbed one through the arm with a short dagger, but another slammed a mace into her side, sending her sprawling. Before she could rise, a cruel sword plunged into her chest.

She gasped once, her eyes wide with shock, and then lay still as the battle raged around her.

"Selda!" Bruni screamed, rushing toward her, only to be pulled back by Drogan.

"Fight now, weep later!" he barked, dragging her behind the line.

Gili, seeing Selda fall, fought with renewed fury. He slammed his shield into a bandit's face, breaking teeth, then hacked down another who tried to flee. Blood spattered his beard and armor, his muscles screaming with every swing.

The bandits began to falter. Though they outnumbered the villagers, they were not prepared for the rage and determination of a people defending their homes. They broke and fled in twos and threes, limping and dragging the wounded, leaving their dead behind.

The battle was over.

The villagers stood among the fallen, panting, bloody, victorious—but not without cost. Selda's body was carried gently to the common house, covered with a simple cloth.

Gili leaned on his sword, wiping blood from his face. His hands trembled—not from fear, but from rage and sorrow.

"They thought us weak," he growled. "They thought wrong."

Orin stood beside him, clutching his wounded leg but smiling grimly.

"They'll remember Birchgrove," he said. "If they live long enough."

The village gathered as the sun dipped low, the blood of friends and foes soaking into the earth. They lit a fire that night for Selda, singing low songs of mourning, and promised that her spirit would live on in every stone, every seed, every breath of Birchgrove. The bandits' bodies were dragged into the forest and thrown in a ditch.

And under the stars, their swords were sharpened, their walls mended, and their hearts bound tighter than ever before.

The evening was thick with the smell of smoke and ale as Orin, Pula, and Gili sat hunched around a battered wooden table in the common house. The fire burned low, shadows flickering across their faces, heavy with anger.

"This toll," Orin spat, slamming his mug down, "it bleeds us dry. We can't feed our own bellies, much less the king's fat army."

Pula nodded, his knuckles white as he clenched the table's edge. "We break our backs so some soft-handed lord can eat goose and wipe his arse with silk."

Gili puffed furiously on his pipe, smoke leaking from his nose like a brewing storm.

"Enough is enough," he growled. "We either bend our knees and die slow... or find another way."

They leaned in close, their voices low, plotting. If they could offer Roderick a bribe, something to line his pockets and turn his eye elsewhere, perhaps they could buy their freedom. A few small pieces of gold—an offering not to the king, but to greed.

A month passed in tense silence, the village wary and waiting.

One evening, as the sun dipped low and the fields shimmered gold, the clatter of hooves echoed from the road. Roderick had returned.

His wagon rolled brazenly into the village, the horses snorting and stamping. Roderick leapt down, his green velvet coat billowing, his face twisted in a sneer.

Without knocking, he stormed up to Gili's door and kicked it open, the heavy wood slamming against the inside wall with a crack.

"There you are, dwarf," Roderick sneered, stepping into the house like he owned it. "Time to load the wagon. You and your little peasants can thank me later."

Gili stood slowly from his chair, pipe hanging from his mouth. He said nothing at first, only moving to the mantle and pulling down a small leather pouch—the last pieces of gold he had cut from the river nugget, precious and few.

He held the pouch out in a calloused hand.

"A gift," Gili said flatly. "To ease your burden. No need to take our crops."

Roderick snatched the pouch, weighed it in his hand, then opened it and laughed—a cruel, barking sound.

"You miserable little shit," he said, flinging the pouch against Gili's chest, the gold scattering across the floor. "You think you can buy me off with these peas? I should have you arrested and your village burned to ash!"

Something in Gili snapped.

He moved without thinking, years of rage and injustice boiling over. He lunged, slamming his shoulder into Roderick's chest, knocking the man sprawling onto the floor.

Gili followed, fists hammering down onto Roderick's sneering face. Blow after blow landed, splitting skin, breaking bone. The human's arms flailed weakly, trying to fend him off, but Gili grabbed Roderick's throat, fingers tightening with blind fury.

"You come here... take... and mock us... like kings over cattle..." Gili snarled through clenched teeth.

Roderick kicked weakly, his face turning purple, his eyes wide with terror.

Only when Roderick's body went still, his mouth slack and eyes staring, did Gili's rage begin to cool. He staggered back, gasping for breath, staring at his bloodied hands.

Silence filled the house, broken only by the soft creak of the wagon horses shifting their weight outside.

He had killed him.



Gili stood over the corpse, chest heaving. Hours passed in a blur. Night fell hard, the village falling into dark slumber while Gili stared at the body cooling on his floor.

At last, he moved.

He grabbed Roderick by the boots, dragging him through the door into the black fields behind the house. Taking up a shovel, he dug deep and fast, the sweat pouring off him in the chill night air. The earth yielded slowly, stubborn and cold. When the hole was ready, Gili kicked Roderick's limp body into it, dirt spattering onto the fine velvet coat.

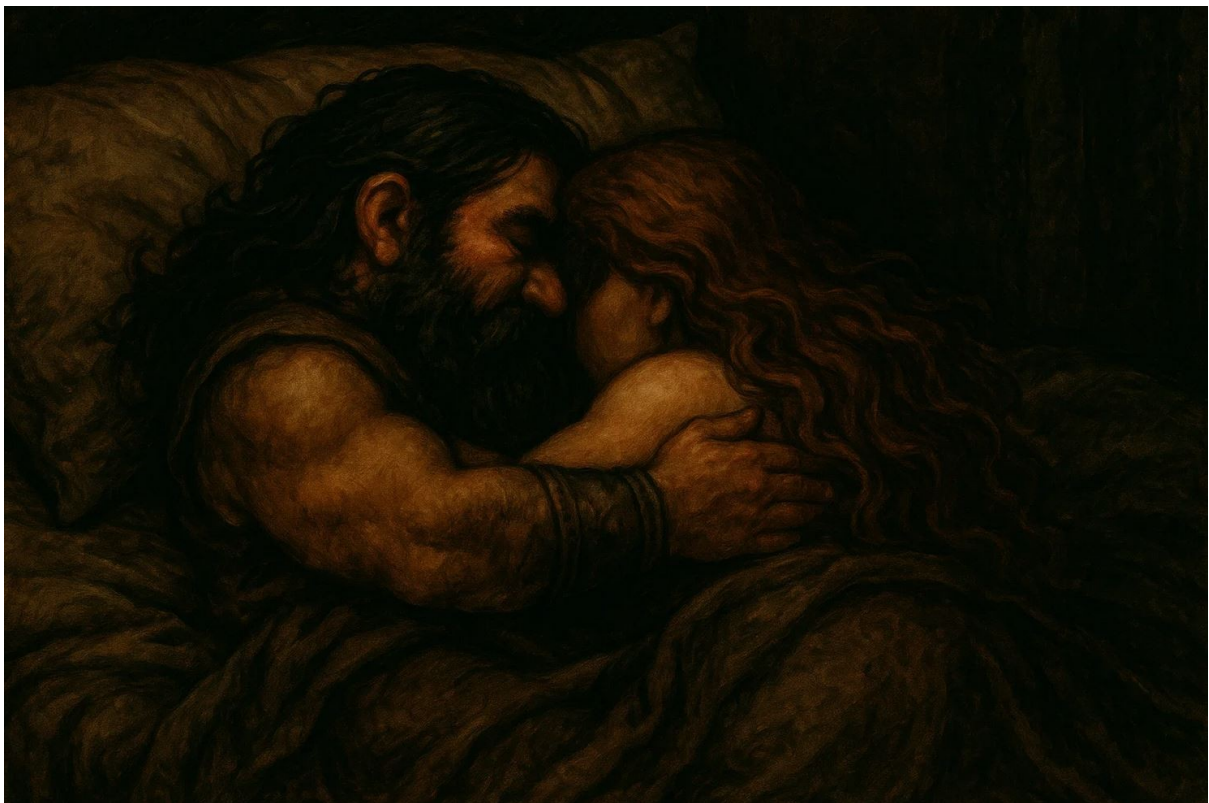
No words. No prayers.

He shoveled the earth back over the body, stamping it down hard, erasing the last mark of the man who had brought so much trouble to Birchgrove. Gili then slapped the horses on the rump, sending them galloping into the night, the wagon rattling behind them, disappearing into the trees.

Back inside, Gili descended into his cellar. He poured himself mug after mug of dark ale, gulping them down, each one burning a little less than the last. His mind swam in a fog of anger, guilt, and grim satisfaction.

Later, half-dreaming, he stumbled into bed just as Sif returned from Hilda's house, carrying the soft scent of cooking herbs and soap.

She slipped into his arms without a word, resting her head against his chest. Gili wrapped his arms around her tightly, breathing in the warmth of her body, the steady heartbeat that grounded him.



In the darkness, with Sif curled beside him and their child sleeping safely in the next room, Gili closed his eyes.

The deed was done.

There would be consequences, sure as stone underfoot.

But for tonight, Birchgrove was his—unclaimed, unruled, and fiercely free.

The sun beat down heavy on Birchgrove as Gili labored in the fields, bent over under the endless blue sky. His hands, thick and calloused, worked steadily to pull out rocks from the soil and tear weeds from the budding barley. Sweat ran down his back, soaking his shirt, but he worked without complaint, as he always had. After hours of toil, he wiped his brow and looked out across the fields—fields that were greener and richer than ever before.

"Not bad for a handful of stubborn folk and a pile of stone," he muttered, dropping a clump of weeds onto a growing pile.

Feeling the heat boil in his blood, Gili made his way to the river. He stripped down to his breeches, tossed his clothes onto the bank, and plunged into the cold, rushing water with a shout. The chill bit deep into his skin, but it washed the dust and sweat clean away, leaving him feeling like a new man. He floated for a moment, staring up at the drifting clouds, letting the river carry his worries off for a while.

Weeks had slipped by since the night Roderick had met his end behind Gili's house. Nothing stirred. Life went on.



Then one morning, a soldier on horseback clattered into the village square, his armor glinting, a sword swinging loosely at his side. The villagers gathered cautiously, dust on their boots, wiping their hands on aprons and tunics.

The soldier, a stern-faced man with a rough beard, addressed them sharply.

"By order of the Crown, we seek information on the whereabouts of Roderick, registrar of King Almund's estates. Has he been seen?"

A long silence answered him.

Pula shook his head slowly. "Haven't seen no such man 'round here."

Bruni added, "Maybe he ran off? Plenty of bandits out in the wilds."

The soldier narrowed his eyes but found no lies he could grasp. He gave a tight nod, muttered something about searching elsewhere, and turned his horse, galloping away down the road in a cloud of dust.

Gili watched him leave, a slow, satisfied smile curling his lips. His pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, smoke curling lazily into the sky.

"Let 'em search every rock and tree," he muttered. "They'll find naught but wind and wolves."

Meanwhile, life in Birchgrove bloomed richer with each passing day. The cattle grew their herds—two lambs born healthy and strong, another calf wobbling on new legs near the barn, and the birds, squawking and bustling, now numbered near sixty heads. The goats were thriving too, fat and full of mischief, their number rising to six.

Sif had taken over weaving for the village, her loom set up in a shady spot outside the house. Her fingers worked quickly, twisting the threads into strong cloth, while pots of fresh cheese drained nearby, heavy with the scent of rich milk.

One evening, Gili sat on the rough bench he had built long ago, pipe smoke drifting into the twilight. He sipped from a mug of his thick, dark ale, savoring the rich taste on his tongue. His mind wandered back to that night—the crack of Roderick's skull, the weight of the body, the dark earth swallowing him whole.

He puffed out a long breath, leaning back against the wall of the house.

"He's dust now," Gili muttered under his breath. "Same as the rest of the fools who thought they owned this land."

The stars blinked awake in the sky as he finished his drink, feeling a deep, heavy peace settle into his bones.

The next day, Gili went to the forge, where Orin was already hard at work. The ringing of hammer on anvil echoed across the village. Sparks flew in wild patterns as Orin shaped iron into nails, horseshoes, and blade blanks.



"Come to swing a hammer or just stand there smokin' like a chimney?" Orin barked, not looking up.

Gili grinned, tossing his pipe aside and picking up a heavy sledge.

"I reckon I'll earn my ale today."

They worked side by side, heating iron till it glowed, hammering it into shape, quenching it in steaming buckets of water. The work was brutal and hot, but it was good work—the kind that left a man feeling real.

Later that week, they took carts and mules up to the pits, digging deep into the earth for more coal and iron. The black dust clung to their skin, their arms ached, but they hauled load after load back to the village.

"By Moradin's beard, we oughta be buildin' a bloody castle with all this iron," Gili joked, tossing a lump of ore into the cart.

Orin wiped the sweat from his face and gave a rare, barking laugh.

"Maybe we are, lad," he said. "A castle made of sweat, stone, and stubborn fools like us."

They finished the day caked in dust, tired but proud. Birchgrove was stronger than ever, their hands had seen to it—and Gili knew, deep down, that this life, this village, was worth every scar he carried.

## **Mountain journey**

The morning was bright and crisp when Gili knocked on Orin's and Pula's doors, pipe clenched between his teeth, a satchel of supplies already slung over his shoulder.

"Get your boots on, lads," Gili said with a grin. "We're headin' upriver. I reckon the higher we go, the richer the river runs."

Orin leaned in the doorway, wiping soot from his hands, and raised an eyebrow.

"Chasin' gold again, eh? You sure there's more than river mud and fool's dreams up there?"

Gili puffed his pipe and winked. "Only one way to find out."

Pula, hearing the commotion, joined them, already buckling a small pack over his shoulders.

"I'm not lettin' you two old mules stumble off alone," he said. "Ye'd be halfway buried under a rockslide before the sun set."

They packed quickly—armor strapped down tight, swords and axes sharpened, spears slung over backs. They carried flint and tinder, tents, cured meats, cheese, bread, and of course a skin or two of dark ale to keep the chill off.

They set out by the river, the water running cold and fast beside them, its voice a constant murmur against the rocks. The land grew wilder as they pressed on, the trees taller, their roots clawing into the stones, the bushes thicker and thornier. The trail thinned into a rough path, more game trail than road, and the cliffs on either side of the river rose steadily.

By midday, they found a bend in the river where the water slowed slightly, creating a shallow bar of gravel and sand.

"This looks a fine place to get dirty," Gili said, tossing his pack down and pulling out his pickaxe and sieve.

They dug and sifted for hours, their hands black with mud, their backs aching, but nothing glittered up from the dirt save common stones and broken shells.

"All this work and not even a silver glint," Pula grumbled, shaking out a sieve full of nothing.

Gili grinned around his pipe. "If diggin' were easy, we'd be rich already."

Orin, who had been silent most of the afternoon, finally leaned back against a boulder and spoke.

"Truth is," he said, wiping sweat from his forehead, "even if we found gold, I'd not trade Birchgrove for all the kings' crowns in the South."

"Aye," Pula said, tossing a stone into the river. "Gold's nice... but a roof, a field, and a mug at the end of the day—that's the real treasure."

The sun dipped low, and they caught fish from the river with hooks tied to sticks, roasting them over a crackling fire. The smoke drifted into the star-pricked sky, and they sat close to the flames, mugs of ale in hand, the warmth seeping into their tired bones.

"Remember when we built the mill?" Gili said, chuckling. "Took us three tries just to set the wheel right. Near drowned Orin in the river."

Orin snorted. "That's 'cause ye couldn't tell left from right if yer beard depended on it."

They laughed, loud and free, the sound echoing off the rocky cliffs.

Later, under the low whisper of the wind through the pines, they crawled into their tent, the river singing them into uneasy sleep.

The next day, they rose with the grey light and pressed further into the mountains. The river wound tighter here, cutting deep into the stone. Tall cliffs loomed on either side, dark and jagged like ancient teeth. The trees grew thinner, scraggly pines gripping the rocky slopes. The air smelled sharp—of stone, water, and the clean, lonely scent of the high places.

They climbed up a tumble of boulders, loose rocks sliding under their boots.

"Easy now," Gili grunted, hoisting himself up. "One slip and you'll be fish food."

Pula reached the top first, extending a hand down to Gili, then Orin. They sat for a moment to catch their breath, looking out over the land below—the ribbon of the river, the dark green sweep of the forest, and far in the distance, the tiny specks of fields where Birchgrove lay hidden under the mountain's shadow.

Gili drew a long pull from his waterskin and passed it around.

"Hard life," he said, watching the river glint like a blade in the morning sun. "But it's ours."

Orin nodded, running a thumb over the haft of his axe. "Aye. Built with our hands, not given by lords or kings."

Pula leaned back against the boulder, a faint smile under his dusty beard.

"Let's find us some gold," he said. "And if not, we'll have stories worth their weight."



The climb grew harder as the day wore on. Gili, Orin, and Pula pressed higher along the river's rocky path, the mountain walls squeezing tighter around them. The trail was a thin thread among the boulders now, and every step kicked loose stones clattering down the slopes.

Suddenly, a low grumbling sound drifted to their ears, a rumbling like deep earth moving.

They froze, weapons ready.

From behind a towering boulder, two figures lumbered into view—trolls, tall as a two-story house, with arms thick as tree trunks and skin the color of mossy stone. Their faces were broad and flat, mouths full of jagged teeth, and small, cruel eyes glinting under heavy brows.

The trolls barked at each other in a harsh, guttural tongue, then turned their attention to the dwarves.

"Yuu... leave shinies," one grunted, pointing at Gili's sword with a thick, broken-nailed finger. "Shiny... food... you go!"

The other troll slobbered and growled, "You no fight. You give shinies. Good deal. Heh heh."

Orin muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "They want our gear... and they ain't askin' polite."



Gili grinned fiercely and drew his sword.

"Then they'll have to take it from our cold, dead hands."

The trolls roared, shaking the ground, and charged.

The first troll swung a massive club, a broken tree trunk really, and Gili just barely rolled aside as it crashed into the ground, shattering stones. He came up swinging, slashing deep into the troll's calf. Blackish blood poured out, and the beast howled in rage.

Orin rushed forward with his war hammer, bashing the second troll square in the knee. Bones cracked audibly, and the troll stumbled, but retaliated with a backhanded swipe that caught Orin across the ribs and hurled him like a rag doll into a boulder.

Pula darted between the two beasts, loosing arrow after arrow. Most of them bounced harmlessly off thick hide, but one lodged deep into the troll's throat, making it choke and stagger.

Gili danced around the first troll, hacking and slashing, trying to keep it off balance. But it was like trying to fight a landslide. A massive hand clipped Gili's shoulder, sending him sprawling to the dirt with a snarl of pain.

"Stone's teeth," Gili grunted, spitting blood as he scrambled back to his feet.

The fight raged fiercely. Orin, dazed but furious, hammered blows into the crippled leg of one troll until it buckled, crashing to its knees. Gili seized the chance and drove his sword deep into the troll's chest, twisting hard. The beast let out a shuddering roar and fell heavily to the ground, shaking the earth.

Pula and Orin turned together on the remaining troll, working in tandem. Orin smashed the creature's shin, dropping it low, while Pula sprinted up a rock and leapt, driving his short sword straight into the troll's eye.

The creature convulsed and collapsed with a wet, final grunt.

Silence fell, broken only by the harsh gasping of the three dwarves.

Gili leaned heavily on his sword, blood dripping from a gash along his side.

"Well," he said through gritted teeth, "that were a proper brawl."

Orin staggered over, pulling a small glass vial from his belt.

"Drink," he rasped, tossing one to Gili and Pula.

They each drank the healing potion, grimacing at the bitter taste, but feeling the warmth rush through their battered bodies, closing wounds and dulling the sharpest pains.

"Better," Pula muttered, wiping blood from his forehead. "But I wouldn't mind fewer teeth in the next dance."

They pressed on, limping a little, bruised and aching but alive.

As they wound along a narrow ledge, a sharp cracking sound split the air. Gili looked up just in time to see a massive boulder come hurtling down from above.

"Move!" he roared.

Pula, wide-eyed, dove to the side, just escaping the crushing rock. He landed face-first against a jagged stone with a loud thud, groaning as blood gushed from his smashed nose.

Orin helped him up, chuckling grimly.

"Ye look like a squashed turnip."

Pula groaned, pinching his nose. "Feels like one too."

They decided that was enough madness for the moment. They made camp in a sheltered hollow between two massive stones, laying out cloaks and kindling a small fire.

Gili pulled out dried meat and hard bread from his pack, tossing pieces around. Orin popped the cork on a skin of ale, and they passed it between them.

They ate in silence for a time, the fire crackling, the river a soft roar in the distance.

Gili leaned back, lighting his battered old pipe, and puffed slowly into the crisp mountain air.

"Ye know," he said, staring up at the stars, "there's easier ways to die than chasing bits o' gold and pickin' fights with trolls."

Orin laughed, his side stitched tight with bandages. "Aye. But none near as noble."

Pula, nose stuffed with a wad of cloth, raised his mug in a mock toast.

"To stubborn fools."

They clinked mugs, grinned bloody smiles at each other, and sat back to rest, battered but still alive under the silent, star-bright sky.

The morning was sharp and cold as they packed up their camp, the river now a thin ribbon far below them. The mountains loomed higher ahead, jagged against the steel-gray sky. Gili, Orin, and Pula pressed onward, boots grinding against stone, breath misting in the chill air.

It wasn't long before they spotted the mouth of a cave tucked between two massive slabs of broken stone, half-hidden by bramble and shadow. The entrance yawned black and wide, like the open maw of some ancient beast.

Gili stood before it, torch in hand, the light flickering in the shifting breeze.

"Could be nothin'," Pula said, eyeing the darkness warily.

"Could be gold," Gili countered, grinning through his thick beard. "Only one way to know."

Orin grunted, pulling free his hammer and slinging a shield onto his arm. "Let's be about it, then."

They lit fresh torches, the flames sputtering and spitting as they stepped inside.

The cave swallowed them instantly. The world narrowed to the small circle of torchlight, flickering across damp walls slick with moisture. Water dripped steadily from the ceiling,

splashing into shallow pools on the uneven floor. The air was thick and heavy with the scent of wet stone and the earth's deep, slow breath.

Their boots splashed in puddles as they moved deeper, their torches painting ghostly shapes across the walls. Cracks and crevices ran like veins through the stone, and every gust of hidden wind seemed to whisper at their backs.



After some time winding through the twisting tunnels, they reached a bend where the path split. Gili raised a hand to halt the group.

Ahead, in the darkness beyond the bend, a scatter of blinking eyes reflected their torchlight. Low hissing noises echoed off the stone.

Gili tightened his grip on his sword.

"Company," he muttered.

Then they stepped into view.

Ten figures—tall, reptilian humanoids, their scaly hides blending almost perfectly with the stone walls. Their yellow eyes gleamed with savage hunger, sharp claws flexing in anticipation. A foul, choking stench rolled over the party like a wave, thick and musky, making Gili gag and blink away tears.

"Troglodytes," Orin hissed. "Blast it, hold your stomachs, lads!"

The creatures hissed louder, then surged forward as one.



The fight exploded into chaos.

The troglodytes came fast and feral, clawing and snapping with razor teeth. Gili swung his sword wide, cleaving into one, splitting scaly flesh. Another leapt at him from the side, its claws raking along his shoulder, slicing through his armor with a screech of tearing leather and steel.



Orin stood firm with his shield up, hammer swinging in brutal arcs. He smashed one troglodyte's skull flat, but another tore into his thigh with a snapping bite, and he roared in pain, slamming his shield into its face.

Pula kept moving, light on his feet despite the narrow tunnel, stabbing with quick, sharp thrusts of his spear. His face was a grimace of effort, blood from his busted nose still crusted across his lip. He dropped one troglodyte with a spear through the gut but took a savage slash across his ribs for the trouble.

The stench burned their lungs, and their strikes came slower, weaker. Gili felt the weight of it drag him down, his sword arm heavy. But stubbornness and rage kept him upright. With a roar, he hacked down another reptilian, kicking its twitching body aside.

The troglodytes swarmed them, clawing and shrieking, but slowly, the dwarves' ferocity turned the tide.

Gili caught one by the wrist mid-swipe and drove his sword deep into its chest.

Orin knocked another off its feet and crushed its throat under his boot with a sickening crunch.



Pula finished the last one by driving his dagger into the base of its skull, the creature giving a final shudder before collapsing.

Silence fell again, broken only by the ragged gasps of the living.

The ground was littered with the bodies of the dead, the tunnel slick with blood. Gili dropped to one knee, wiping his blade on a fallen troglodyte's hide.

"By the gods," he coughed, spitting to clear the stench from his mouth. "That smell'll haunt me for a year."

Orin leaned heavily against his shield, blood streaming down one arm.

"More than the smell if we don't patch up," he grunted.

Pula stumbled over, pressing a hand to his bleeding side.

Gili fished out the last of their healing potions, handing them around. They drank deeply, the warmth spreading through their battered bodies, knitting torn flesh, dulling the worst of the pain.

Still, they were left with aching limbs, torn gear, and blood-streaked faces.

They sat there for a moment in the flickering light, breathing hard, the cave walls closing around them like a tomb.

"That," Gili said, lighting his battered pipe with shaking hands, "was too close for comfort."

Pula laughed hoarsely, wiping blood from his beard.

"Next time ye find a cave, Gili," he said, "maybe we just toss a stone in first and listen."

Orin just grunted, pulling a rag from his belt and tying it around a cut on his arm.

Gili puffed out a long stream of smoke, eyes flickering with stubborn fire.

"There's gold in these mountains, lads," he said quietly. "I can feel it."

And after a short rest, they picked themselves up, patched and bruised, and pressed deeper into the black heart of the earth, where riches and danger awaited in equal measure.

The deeper they ventured into the mountain tunnels, the colder the air grew. Gili's breath fogged before him, and every footstep splashed in small trickles of water leaking from the ceiling. The walls glistened slick with dampness, and the faint, ever-present drip of water echoed around them like slow, patient drums.

Gili held his torch close to the rocky walls, inspecting every crack and crevice.

"Maybe a vein," he muttered, scraping at the stone with his knife. "Gold or silver tucked in the old bones of the mountain."

But no gleam of treasure revealed itself, only more stubborn grey stone.

They pressed on, choosing the tunnel veering left, which sloped steadily downward into thicker darkness. Their boots slipped on the wet stone, and the air grew thinner, colder. Soon they came upon a wide chasm, the floor falling away into a black abyss. Across the way, another tunnel mouth beckoned, but it was too far to leap.

Orin unslung the rope from his pack, tying a heavy iron hook to one end. He spun it once, twice, then hurled it across the gap. The hook caught a jagged outcrop with a satisfying *clink*, and they tugged it tight.

One by one, they crossed—hand over hand, swinging slightly over the dark emptiness. Gili grunted with the effort, muttering prayers to the old gods with every strained breath. At last, all three stood panting on the far side.

"Remind me," Pula said, brushing dust from his knees, "to start trainin' the lads in bridge-buildin'."

"Or wings," Orin grunted.

They chuckled and pressed on, veering right down a narrower tunnel. The air smelled different here—earthy, musky, with a hint of something sharper beneath. Gili slowed, raising a hand.

Ahead, in the dim torchlight, something stirred.

Then they saw them—twenty kobolds, packed into the tunnel like angry rats.

They were tiny, barely reaching Gili's belt, with thin, wiry frames and bow-legged stances. Their scaly hides gleamed rust-red and muddy tan, cracked like old leather. Long, narrow snouts filled with needle-sharp teeth gnashed the air. Their batlike ears twitched and flicked, catching every noise.

Beady yellow and green eyes flashed with cunning and fear, and their whip-like tails lashed the ground behind them. They wore scraps of filthy leather and scavenged metal, some sporting crude shields made from planks or old barrel lids. Spears, slings, and jagged knives bristled in their claws.

The kobolds darted from rock to rock, chirping and hissing like angry insects. Despite their size, there was nothing laughable about them—there were too many.

One, larger than the others and with a necklace of beads and bones, screeched and pointed a rusted dagger at the dwarves.

"Break them! Break dwarves!" it screeched in broken Common.

With a chorus of shrieks and yips, the pack charged.

Gili roared and swung his sword low, cleaving a kobold nearly in half. Blood sprayed the walls, and the others hesitated just for a moment—but their numbers gave them courage.

The kobolds swarmed.

Gili found himself surrounded, blades and spears stabbing at his legs and waist. He batted them away with his shield, swinging wide arcs with his sword, but he could feel their tiny blades scoring shallow cuts across his armor.



Orin roared like a bull, hammering kobolds left and right, smashing bones and skulls. A sling stone caught him across the cheek, splitting the skin, but he barely flinched, driving his hammer down into another kobold's chest with a sickening crunch.

Pula stabbed furiously with his spear, skewering one kobold and kicking another into the wall. But the creatures were everywhere, scrambling up the walls, ducking under swings, trying to trip them with their tails.

The smell of musk and sweat was overwhelming, and the narrow tunnel made it impossible to swing wide or maneuver easily.

One kobold leapt onto Gili's back, tiny claws scrabbling for his neck. Gili roared and slammed himself backwards against the wall, crushing the creature with a wet snap.

More came.

The fight was frantic, savage. The dwarves fought shoulder to shoulder, their backs against the tunnel wall, standing firm against the tide.

Minutes dragged like hours.

At last, panting, bleeding from a dozen small wounds, the three dwarves stood over a carpet of broken, twitching bodies. The last few kobolds fled shrieking into the darkness, leaving trails of blood and discarded weapons behind them.

Gili wiped his sword clean on a ragged kobold cloak, breathing heavily.

"Ugly little bastards," he muttered, kicking aside a fallen shield.

Orin leaned heavily on his hammer, his face and arms covered in scratches and bruises.

"I've wrestled pigs cleaner'n that lot," he said, spitting blood.

Pula winced, pulling a small dagger out of his thigh with a grunt.

"Remind me... never to follow you into a 'small job' again, Gili."

They laughed, weakly, battered but alive.

Orin uncorked another healing draught, and they each took a deep swig, feeling the potion's warmth knit skin and ease the worst of their aches.

Gili slumped against the wall, lighting his pipe with shaking hands.

"Whatever gold's in this mountain," he said, smoke curling from his mouth, "it better be worth it."

They rested there a while, gathering their strength, knowing that deeper dangers still waited ahead in the heart of the earth.

The tunnel narrowed and twisted downward, the flickering torchlight throwing long, dancing shadows on the rough-hewn walls. Gili, Orin, and Pula moved carefully, boots scraping softly against damp stone. After some time winding through the bowels of the mountain, they came upon a small chamber, roughly carved out of the rock—clearly the work of claw and crude tool, not the fine craftsmanship of true stonemasons.

The walls were rough and uneven, patches of lichen clinging to the moist stone. In the center of the room, half-hidden behind a tumble of rocks, sat a simple wooden chest, its surface battered and stained, iron bands rusted but still holding firm.

Gili strode forward eagerly, wiping grime from the lid with his sleeve.

"By the stones," he muttered. "What have we here?"

Orin approached warily, hammer in hand. "Could be trapped."

Pula crouched low, examining the chest carefully. He poked around it with the butt of his spear, checked under the lid, sniffed the air.

"No wires, no trickstones," he said at last. "Looks safe enough."

Gili grinned and swung the lid open.

Inside, nestled on a threadbare cloth, lay seven small nuggets of gold, each roughly the size of a walnut. One larger nugget, as big as a man's thumb, gleamed bright even in the dim light. Beside them sat a tarnished but finely made silver cup, several thin silver rings twisted with delicate patterns, and a scattering of old gold coins, stamped with the image of a forgotten king whose crown was shaped like mountain peaks.



Gili whistled low, his eyes wide with wonder.

"Look at this, lads," he said, scooping a handful of gold nuggets and letting them fall back into the chest with a satisfying clink. "You see? I told you there's treasure in these mountains!"

Orin laughed, a rare, deep rumble from his chest.

"Aye, and now we know why the rats and lizards fought so hard."

Pula was already sliding the coins into a leather pouch, counting under his breath.

"Seven small nuggets, one big nugget, one silver cup, four silver rings... and about... twenty-seven gold coins of unknown make."

They packed the treasure carefully into their packs, wrapping the silver cup and rings in cloth to keep them from clattering.

Pressing onward, they soon found a wider tunnel where the air grew drier and colder. They decided to take a break, setting their backs against the stone walls. Gili struck his flint, lighting his pipe and sending rich smoke curling into the heavy air.

It was then he noticed them—ancient runes, carved deep into the stone wall.

He stood slowly, running his calloused fingers over the worn symbols.

"Look here," he said. "Runes. Old ones."

Orin and Pula joined him, peering close.

"They're worn near smooth," Orin muttered. "Older than Birchgrove, older than the shrine we fixed."

Gili squinted at the faded markings, murmuring softly as he tried to read.

"'Duraz'... stone," he said slowly. "'Karuk'... deep, or hidden. 'Mordun'... strength, maybe."

He puffed on his pipe, deep in thought.

"Could be these were made by the old folk," Gili said. "The first ones who built the shrine up top. Maybe they lived down here once, long before the goblins and kobolds crawled in."

Pula pulled a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese from his pack, breaking pieces and handing them out. They ate quickly, chewing hard, washing it down with swigs of strong, dark ale from battered skins.

As they rested, the conversation turned.

"We found our share," Orin said, adjusting the bandage around his arm. "Gold, silver, a right story to tell. Maybe we turn back, eh? No sense pushin' luck further."

Gili shook his head, eyes gleaming like the gold in his pack.

"There's more," he said, voice low with stubborn certainty. "I can feel it in my bones. This place isn't done yet."

Pula looked between them, hesitating.

"Another tunnel down the left side," he said slowly. "Looked darker than a goblin's heart. Could lead deeper."

Gili knocked the ash from his pipe and stood, stretching his back.

"Then that's where we're goin'," he said, gripping his sword. "We didn't crawl through mud and blood just to turn tail now."

Orin sighed heavily but rose to his feet, hammer slung back over his shoulder.

"You're mad," he said. "But we're mad with ye."

They tightened their belts, hefted their weapons, and with torches raised high, they stepped deeper into the unknown, the mountain swallowing them whole.

The tunnel narrowed into a crack so thin that Gili, Orin, and Pula had to turn sideways to squeeze through. The rock pressed in close, scraping against armor and packs, and the air grew stale and bitter. As they inched forward, their torchlight flickered against strange, glistening strands stretched across the passage like ancient cobwebs dusted over with rock grit and pebbles.

Gili paused, tapping one strand lightly with his sword. It quivered, and somewhere deep ahead, a soft vibration answered—a signal passed along silk threads.

"Careful," he muttered, his voice tight. "Something's watchin'."

Pula nodded grimly, tightening his grip on his spear. Orin simply grunted, shifting his shield forward.

Beyond the crack, the tunnel opened into a vast, domed cavern, easily forty feet across. Their torches cast feeble light into the darkness, barely reaching the far walls. The cavern was a twisted jungle of sticky silk. Thick, crisscrossing strands formed a tangled, three-dimensional maze, stretching from wall to wall, floor to ceiling. Hammocks and sling nests swung gently from above, each one woven of glistening web and filled with shapes—some still, some twitching faintly in the torchlight.

The ground beneath their boots was treacherous, layered with woven silk mats reinforced by broken bones, sticks, and shards of stone. Every step felt uncertain, the surface giving slightly, threatening to trip or catch a foot at any moment.

Here and there, narrow stone ledges jutted out from the walls, and stalactites hung like cruel teeth from the ceiling—perfect perches for something to lurk and pounce. Every few steps, the ground was strung with nearly invisible tripwires of silk, and the stale air smelled thickly of dust, damp stone, and something far fouler—old blood, rot, and the coppery tang of prey long dead.

A constant low clicking and scraping filled the chamber, a chorus of claws tapping against stone and silk. It echoed and danced around them, impossible to pin down. It was the sound of many creatures speaking without words, plotting and watching from the unseen heights.

Off to one side, a smaller tunnel gaped open, the air from it even fouler. The faint sound of younglings—wet, wriggling, and ravenous—could just barely be heard. The hatchery.

To the opposite side, there was a wide chamber framed by thick webs woven so tightly they looked like shimmering walls. Strange constructs of web reinforced with bone and stone could be seen—shields, doors, crude weapons. The weaver's domain, perhaps even the chieftain's lair.

Here and there, cracks in the rock floor opened into storage pits, each one lined with silk and shadow. From some of them, glints of metal caught the light—stolen treasures and hoarded goods, no doubt guarded by traps or worse.

Above it all, the air was a humid, clinging nightmare, the faint patches of green luminescence woven into some of the webs casting sickly, ghost-like glows through the dark.

Gili lowered his voice to a whisper, his eyes scanning the shifting shadows above.

"This place is a damned hive," he muttered, his hand tightening on his sword hilt. "Every step's a gamble."

Pula's eyes darted nervously from silk nest to silk nest, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Whatever lives here... it's not gonna let us walk out easy."

Orin sniffed the air once and grunted.

"Feels like death."

They stood in the mouth of the nightmare, knowing full well that every click, every scrape, every tiny movement meant something was waiting, hidden just out of sight, ready to fall upon them like a trap sprung tight.

Ahead lay only darkness, silk, and the hungry, unseen eyes of the chitines.

The air grew colder, the sticky webbing thicker as Gili, Orin, and Pula crept deeper into the nightmare hive. Their torches guttered and hissed in the dampness, throwing jittery shadows across the web-draped walls and ceiling. Every few steps, the low tapping and clicking grew louder, surrounding them from every side.

Gili stopped suddenly, raising a clenched fist.

Out of the gloom, six figures emerged, scuttling from the upper reaches of the cavern like living nightmares. Chitines—twisted, spiderlike creatures crouching low, their four thin arms twitching and ready, their black glistening eyes unblinking. Each stood no taller than four feet, but their long, jointed limbs and jerking movements made them seem larger, more alien.

Their bodies were covered in dark gray, ridged carapace, their faces triangular with wide mandibles clicking hungrily. Two main arms clutched weapons—short, jagged swords made of sharpened bone and metal scraps—while smaller arms near their ribcages twitched and wove strands of sticky silk from small pouches on their backs.

The chitines hissed and tapped their claws on the stone and webbing, a grim, chilling rhythm that echoed off the walls.



Gili set his jaw and gripped his sword tighter.

"Here they come," he growled.

With sudden, terrifying speed, the chitines lunged forward, scuttling across the walls and ceiling with jerky, unnatural motion.

The first chitine dropped down from above, hurling a net of sticky silk at Orin. The dwarf barely raised his shield in time, the net splattering across it instead of pinning him to the ground.



"Stone's breath!" Orin cursed, slamming his hammer into the chitine's side as it lunged, knocking it away, but not before a dagger grazed his leg, leaving a burning numbness in its wake.

Pula loosed an arrow at another chitine clinging to the wall, the shaft sinking into its shoulder. It screeched, but still came on, flinging a javelin tipped with a dripping black fluid that barely missed Pula's throat.

Two chitines tackled Gili at once, their claws raking at his armor, trying to drag him down. He roared and spun, slashing one across the abdomen, dark ichor spraying the ground, but the other clung to his back, sharp claws gouging into his shoulder.

Gili staggered, the weight throwing him off balance. He smashed backward against a stalagmite, crushing the chitine and feeling its carapace crack under the force, but not before it raked his side with a poisoned dagger. A cold numbness began to creep into his ribs, making his left arm sluggish.

"They're tryin' to bleed us slow!" he bellowed, swinging his sword one-handed now.

Another chitine hurled itself at Pula, knocking him to the ground. The dwarf struggled, holding the creature back with both hands as its fangs snapped inches from his face. With a desperate heave, Pula twisted and drove his dagger up under its chin, the chitine convulsing and falling limp.

Orin was back-to-back with Gili, hammer flashing in wild arcs, smashing a chitine's weapon arm to pulp. But another chitine darted in low, slashing Orin's calf with a poisoned blade, sending the smith to one knee.

"We can't hold much longer!" Orin grunted, sweat pouring down his soot-streaked face.

Gili, blood dripping from a dozen wounds, snarled through gritted teeth.

"We're gettin' out of here—NOW!"

Pula scrambled up, tossing a torch into a thick wall of webbing near the chamber's entrance. The flame caught, and in seconds, a wall of fire and smoke roared upward, filling the air with a choking stench of burning silk.

The chitines hissed and shrieked, retreating from the flames in disarray, their shadows dancing wildly across the walls.

"Run!" Gili barked, grabbing Orin by the shoulder and dragging him to his feet.

They charged through the smoke, coughing and stumbling, the world a whirl of fire and darkness. Sticky strands of web clung to their armor, slowing them, but they hacked and tore their way free, not daring to look back.

Behind them, the chitines shrieked in fury, scuttling after them, but the fire and smoke bought precious moments.

They reached the rope bridge they had crossed earlier, and without thinking, Gili slashed the rope loose with his sword, sending the line tumbling into the abyss behind them.

The chitines screeched in frustration as the three battered dwarves stumbled back into the twisting tunnels, half-crawling, half-running, torches guttering low.

When at last they burst out into the wider mountain caves, they collapsed to the ground, heaving for breath, blood oozing from a hundred cuts.

Orin lay back against a rock, gasping.

"That," he wheezed, "was too close."

Pula wiped blood and soot from his face, nodding grimly.

"We're lucky to be breathin'."

Gili, lying on his back and staring at the stone ceiling, let out a weak, rasping laugh.

"Aye... but we got gold... and stories worth their weight."

For now, they were alive. Battered, poisoned, and bruised—but alive.

The mountain had tested them, and they had not yet fallen.

The cold night wind cut into their battered faces as Gili, Orin, and Pula stumbled down the slippery mountain path. Their torches were long dead, and the only light was the pale gleam of the moon over the jagged peaks. Every step was agony. Their limbs were torn, their armor shredded, and their strength almost gone.

Gili slipped on a patch of loose stone, falling hard onto one knee, grunting with the pain, but pushing on. Orin fared worse — he lost his footing entirely, tumbling down a short incline and smashing his head against a rock-strewn patch of dirt. He rolled over with a groan, his face bloodied and bruised, one eye swelling already.

Pula was staggering, wiping tears from his face, his chest hitching with ragged breath.

"I can't," he whimpered. "I can't—"

"Stop yer sniveling," Gili growled, grabbing Pula by the arm and hauling him upright. "We're alive, lad! Happy to be breathin'. Now move yer feet before something else in those cursed hills smells us dyin'."

Pula nodded miserably, stumbling after him.

The long hours of dread passed slowly, each step down the mountain a battle against pain and exhaustion. They fell more than once, scraping knees, bruising ribs, but somehow they kept moving, stubborn and grim.

When they finally staggered into Birchgrove, the village was still, the warm glow of hearths flickering behind shutters. They looked like walking corpses — bloodied, mud-caked, hollow-eyed.

Without ceremony, they made for the common house where they kept supplies. They ransacked the shelves for any healing potions left, downing the last few mouthfuls they could find, slapping crude bandages over their wounds. It was a patchwork job at best, but it was enough to keep them standing.

Gili limped to his house, pushed open the door, and found Sif there, sewing by the fire, their child sleeping in a cradle nearby.

She looked up — and her eyes widened with horror.

"Gili! Stone and stars, what've you done to yourself this time?!"

He grinned weakly, barely managing to pull off his torn armor before collapsing into her arms. She caught him with a gasp, feeling the heat of his fevered skin.

That night, Gili tossed and turned in the grip of fever dreams.

In the black of sleep, he ran endless tunnels where silk clung to his face, hands reaching for him from the darkness. The chitines were everywhere, clicking and hissing, their eyes gleaming like dying stars. Gili fought and fought, but the more he swung his sword, the heavier it became, until he could barely lift it.

Then the dream shifted. Great stone figures rose around him, faces carved like the mountain itself. The Ancients. Their mouths moved, whispering in strange, broken tongues he could not understand. Their words buzzed and boomed in his skull, and he felt as though the mountain itself was trying to tell him something.

He woke with a jolt, drenched in sweat, his throat parched like dry stone.

Sif was there, sitting beside him, a wet cloth in her hand. Her eyes were red with worry and anger.

"You stubborn, fool-headed mule," she muttered, wiping his forehead. "Ye nearly died. Again."

Gili tried to smile, but only managed a weak grunt. His voice was a dry rasp.

"Was worth it."

Later, when he was stronger, he presented Sif with the treasures — the gold nuggets, the silver rings, the old coins. He laid them out on the table, watching her eyes widen in amazement.

"See?" he said, chuckling low and guttural. "Told ye. Worth it."

He poured a heavy mug of his best dark ale, downing it in one long pull, the rich brew staining his beard.

Still laughing, he staggered to his feet and, with a playful slap, swatted Sif's backside.

She yelped and spun to glare at him, but her mouth twitched at the corners, fighting a smile.

"You'll be the death of me, Gili of Birchgrove," she said.

"Aye," Gili grinned, winking. "But what a life, eh?"

Outside, the village slept peacefully under the stars, and Gili, battered and bruised, drank deep from life, as only a true dwarf of the mountains could.

## **A Festival**

The weeks rolled by like the river's steady flow, and slowly the wounds from their terrible venture into the mountain healed. Birchgrove, with its patched fields, sturdy homes, and stubborn folk, felt more alive than ever. One crisp morning, Sif stood in the middle of the village square, hands on her hips, a fire burning in her bright eyes.

"We're doin' it!" she announced, loud enough for all the villagers gathering nearby to hear. "Birchgrove's born proper, and we're gonna mark it like decent folk! A Founding Festival! Food, drink, games, and no one say no!"

Gili laughed, puffing his pipe, standing next to Orin and Pula.

"By the stones, woman, you run this village more than I do," he muttered under his breath, grinning with pride.

Preparations began at once. Flags were stitched from scraps of cloth, painted with crude but proud symbols—hammers, sheaves of barley, the great birch tree for which the village was named. Long tables were set out under the open sky. Barrels of ale rolled from cellars, and the women and children worked tirelessly, baking breads, roasting meat, and stewing vegetables until the whole village smelled like a feast.

On the day of the festival, the air buzzed with excitement.

The first contest was axe-throwing, with a sturdy old oak slab dragged from the woods to serve as a target. Gili stepped up first, flexing his thick arms and tossing the axe with a grin. The blade thunked deep into the bullseye, drawing cheers and hearty slaps on the back.

Pula followed, his throw a little off, but close enough to earn gruff applause.

Orin, limping a little from his still-healing wounds, threw with a grunt—and the axe spun end over end, lodging perfectly.

"Still got it," he said, smirking.

Next came the stone-lifting contest. Huge boulders, rounded and rough, were hauled into the village square. The challenge: lift and carry them across a marked distance. Men and women lined up to try. Gili grunted under a boulder nearly half his size, veins bulging, staggering but making the finish line.

Pula managed a smaller stone, red-faced but triumphant. Even Kendric, the lanky farmer, gave it a go and fell over laughing halfway through, much to everyone's amusement.

After the contests of strength, came the baking contest. Bruni and Hilda squared off against Sif and a few others. Baskets of fresh-baked loaves were laid out, rich with the smell of honey, herbs, and the hearty, nutty scent of good barley flour. Judges—mostly the oldest villagers—smacked their lips and muttered gravely before awarding Sif's rich, crusty loaf the title of best bread in Birchgrove.

At sunset, with mugs of ale in hand, everyone gathered around the great fire in the center of the square for the storytelling contest. Old Drogan told of spirits in the woods; Bruni wove a funny tale about Kendric losing his trousers while chasing goats; and Pula, red-faced but grinning, recounted Gili's adventure fighting the giant boar—with a few added embellishments that had the whole crowd roaring with laughter.

When it came Gili's turn, he stood slowly, pipe between his teeth, and spun the tale of the mountain—of the gold, the chitines, the desperate fight, and the stubborn will that brought them home.

"And so," he finished, raising his mug high, "Birchgrove was built not just on stone and sweat, but on the iron will of those who call it home!"

A great cheer rose up, echoing off the mountains.

Later, as the stars came out and music drifted through the air—pipes, drums, and clapping hands—Gili and Sif sat side by side on a bench, watching their people laugh and dance.

"You did good," Sif said, nudging him.

Gili smiled, a soft pride warming his heart.

"We all did."

And so the first Birchgrove Festival was born, a day of games, laughter, and fierce pride—a tradition that would carry on through the ages, as sure and steady as the mountains that cradled them.

The sun was just tipping over the mountains when the small caravan rolled into Birchgrove. Two battered wagons creaked and groaned along the rocky road, drawn by thin, travel-worn mules. Behind them, men, women, and children trudged on foot, cloaked in dust and exhaustion. Their clothes were torn, their faces hollow with the hardship of a long journey.

## **New people**

Gili was smoking his pipe outside his house, enjoying the early morning breeze, when Kendric came running up the path.

"Strangers on the road!" he cried. "Comin' to Birchgrove!"

Gili frowned, pulling the pipe from his mouth. "Let's see what sort they are."

By the time the wagons rolled into the center of the village, a small crowd had gathered—Orin, Pula, Bruni, Hilda, Sif, and a few others. The newcomers halted, and one sturdy dwarf with a thick russet beard climbed down from the first wagon.

He approached Gili with a slow, weary gait and bowed low.

"Name's Dorrik Stonehand," he said, voice rough like gravel. "Me, my wife Velda, and our three sons—Torek, Harn, and little Bram—seek a place to stay."



From the second wagon stepped a halfling woman with wild brown curls and a face browned by the sun.

"I'm Lysa Fairfoot," she said. "Me husband Jon and our twins, Ella and Benji. We've fled from wars up north. We... we got nowhere left."

Behind them, two more groups came forward.

A stout, middle-aged dwarf woman with stern eyes introduced herself.

"I'm Marta Ironweave, weaver by trade. Me boys, Dagen and Borik, strong and ready to work."

Last came a smaller halfling man, slight and nervous, wringing his cap in his hands.

"Fenn Tumblebrush, sir. Me wife Mirra, and our young ones—Tomlin and Pippa. We don't eat much, and we work plenty."

Altogether, fifteen weary souls stood before Gili and the gathered villagers, their eyes full of hope and fear.

Gili chewed the end of his pipe thoughtfully, looking them over.

"Aye, you're welcome to rest your bones," he said slowly. "But Birchgrove's a dwarf's village. We work the land, we mine, we build with our own hands. Heavy work, mind."

Lysa stepped forward, squaring her small shoulders.

"We may be small," she said fiercely, "but we can dig, plant, weave, cook, tend animals, mend clothes, run messages—anything that don't need us liftin' half a mountain."

Jon nodded eagerly. "We'll pull our weight, Master Gili. You'll see."

Gili puffed out a long stream of smoke, glancing at Orin and Pula. Both gave slow, silent nods.

Finally, Gili grinned.

"Well then," he said, voice gruff but kind, "welcome to Birchgrove. Just know—ye work hard, ye eat well. Ye slack off, and you'll hear about it."

A cheer went up among the newcomers, many sagging with relief.

"Right," Gili barked, clapping his hands. "We've no homes for you yet, and the ground's too hard to sleep on. Grab your tools, lads—time to build!"

In moments, the village hummed with life. Axes rang out in the forest as timber was felled. Orin and Pula began drawing up simple plans for houses—nothing fancy, but solid, warm homes. Sif organized food and drink for the newcomers, Bruni herded the children to help carry bundles of kindling and smaller stones.

As the sun climbed higher, hammers clanged, saws rasped, and laughter and shouting filled the air.

Birchgrove had grown stronger that day—not just in numbers, but in spirit.

And Gili, pipe between his teeth and arms crossed over his broad chest, watched it all with a quiet, fierce pride.

A month had rolled by since the newcomers arrived, and Birchgrove was now a bustling hive of activity. New homes, simple but sturdy, had risen from the earth—stone, wood, and hard hands shaping the wilderness into something solid. Gili, seeing the village well enough settled, decided it was time to set the newcomers to the true lifeblood of Birchgrove: hard work.



On a clear morning, with mist still clinging to the fields, Gili gathered them all in the village square, his arms crossed, pipe smoldering in the corner of his mouth.

"You came to Birchgrove for a home," he said, voice steady and loud enough for all to hear. "Now ye'll earn it."

He pointed toward the golden stretch of barley swaying in the breeze.

"Fields need tendin'. We've got a harvest to prepare for."

The strongest among the new dwarves—Dorrik and his sons Torek and Harn—took to the fields with scythes. Day after day, they cut the barley with steady swings, bundling the stalks into neat sheaves. Their shirts clung to their backs with sweat, their faces burnt bronze under the relentless sun. Fenn Tumblebrush and his son Tomlin, being lighter of build, were set to gathering the cut barley, stacking it for drying.

Along the riverbank, Lysa Fairfoot organized fishing parties. With nimble hands and quick thinking, she showed the children how to weave simple nets from twine, setting traps among the shallows. Jon and Benji hauled the daily catch back to the village, their small frames stooping under the weight of fresh fish sloshing in buckets.

Marta Ironweave, with her strong hands and sharp eyes, took to repairing the village's worn cloth and weaving new rolls of homespun. Every day, she sat under the wide eaves of her house, loom clacking and shuttles flying, churning out cloth for tunics, cloaks, and sacks.

Velda Stonehand and Mirra Tumblebrush, alongside Sif and Bruni, tended to the growing flock of birds, goats, and cows. They fed the animals, collected eggs, milked goats and cows, and scrubbed troughs clean. Velda even fashioned small makeshift harnesses for the goats, training them to carry small loads.

Inside the mill, young Bram and Borik worked tirelessly. They fed the barley and wheat into the grinding stones, collecting the fresh flour in heavy sacks. Their arms grew thick from the work, and fine dust coated them from head to toe by the end of each day.

The brewing fell to Jon Fairfoot and Torek Stonehand. Under Gili's gruff instruction, they mashed barley, stirred great vats of fermenting ale, and learned to judge the right scent and thickness. Barrels were filled and rolled down into the cool cellars to age.

Meanwhile, Pippa Tumblebrush and Ella Fairfoot took to working the hides under Bruni's careful eye. They scraped, tanned, and softened hides into strong leather for boots, belts, and harnesses. The smell of curing leather mingled with the scent of bread and brewing ale in the village air.

Gili himself kept a close eye on all of it, striding through the village, checking work, shouting encouragement—or scolding—when needed.

"Mind the grindstone, Bram! Ye want meal, not smoke!"

"Benji, watch your fingers with that knife, boy! Ain't no good fishin' with two hands if one's missin'!"

"That's it, Lysa, net those river trout proper. Bigger the better—we eat like kings come supper!"

Slowly but surely, Birchgrove transformed. The fields thickened with grain, the river yielded more fish, the millstones turned daily, the animals fattened, and the air was rich with the smells of work well done.

At sunset, when the day's toil was finished, the villagers gathered outside the common house. Gili would sometimes stand apart, pipe glowing faintly, watching his people laugh, eat, and share their triumphs and troubles.

Sif would sidle up beside him, arms crossed over her chest, a small smile playing on her lips.

"See what ye built, Gili?" she'd whisper.

And Gili, gruff but glowing inside, would grunt through the smoke of his pipe.

"Aye. A village worth its salt."

And with every rising sun, Birchgrove grew stronger, built by calloused hands, stubborn hearts, and dreams rooted deep as the oldest stone.

The evening had grown cool, the stars blinking into life above Birchgrove, when Gili caught a shadow slipping down into his cellar. He moved quietly, barefoot, his pipe left smoldering on the porch. Down the wooden steps he crept, the air thick with the rich smell of ale barrels and the cooler scent of stone.

There, crouched in the half-dark, was Torek Stonehand, prying open a sealed barrel. Gili's rage boiled up instantly.

"You little rat," he growled.

Torek whipped around, wide-eyed, clutching a half-filled clay mug. Before he could flee, Gili charged, grabbing him by the collar and hurling him against the stone wall. Torek let out a yelp, the mug shattering at his feet.

Gili slammed him hard against the wall again for good measure, then grabbed the lad's pockets, pulling them inside out. A few of the old gold coins clattered to the cellar floor—coins from the hidden hoard they'd risked their lives to win.

"So," Gili said, voice low and deadly, "it's not just the ale ye've been takin'."

Torek whimpered, blood trickling from his split lip.

"Please, Master Gili—!"

"No," Gili barked. "Enough words."

Grabbing him by the scruff like a sack of grain, Gili dragged Torek up the cellar steps and threw him into the dirt in front of the gathering villagers. Orin, Pula, and Dorrik himself rushed over at the shouting.

Gili stood over the boy, voice booming.

"This one's no longer welcome here. Torek Stonehand, by my word, ye are banished from Birchgrove! Set foot here again and you'll find worse than a beating waitin' for ye."

Torek, sobbing, picked himself up and limped away, vanishing into the night without so much as a backward glance.

Dorrik stepped forward, shame heavy in his face.

"I... I didn't know," he said, voice hollow. "I swear it, Master Gili. I'll see to it the others stay true."

Gili stared hard at him for a long moment before finally grunting.

"See that ye do, Dorrik. Birchgrove is built on trust. I'll not have it crumbling from inside."

Dorrik bowed his head. "I give ye my word."

The next morning, still brooding over the betrayal, Gili decided he needed fresh air and good trade to clear his head. He loaded his cart with a few hides and barrels of ale, hitched up the mule, and set off for Osyryn village.

There, after some haggling and a lot of cursing, he managed to buy three pigs—two sows and a boar—and a fine new dress of green and blue cloth for Sif. Something nice for her, after all the worries she'd borne.

When he returned, Sif's eyes lit up at the dress, and Gili, hiding a grin, muttered, "Don't say I never bring ye anything pretty."

Sif laughed, spun the dress around herself, and kissed his rough cheek.

Meanwhile, back in Birchgrove, Gili, Orin, and Pula had divided the treasure from the mountain cave equally among them: gold, silver, and the few precious coins that now jingled safely in small strongboxes under their beds.

With the village growing and spirits high, the idea came to expand the common house into a true tavern—a place where travelers could stop, where songs and stories could fill the air along with the scent of ale and roasting meat.

Plans were laid swiftly.

"We'll need real tables," Orin said, sketching in the dirt with a stick. "And benches sturdy enough for dwarves, not them twig-legged halflings."

"We'll need shelves too," Pula added, "for the clay bottles. Can't have 'em rollin' about the floor."

"And upstairs rooms," Gili said, puffing his pipe thoughtfully. "Maybe four or five. Never know when merchants'll come lookin' for a bed."

The entire village set to work. The sound of hammering, sawing, and laughter filled the square for two weeks straight. Long tables and thick-legged chairs were hewn from fresh-cut oak. A bar counter was fashioned from a single massive plank polished to a rich sheen. Clay bottles were stacked neatly on wide shelves behind it, each filled with Gili's dark ale, lighter brews from Pula, and even a few sweet fruit wines from Bruni's experiments.

Mirra Tumblebrush, it turned out, was a deft hand with the flute, and she promised to play in the evenings.

"I'll keep the cups clinkin' and the feet tappin'," she said with a wink, twirling the flute between her fingers.

Finally, the work was done.

The Birchgrove Tavern stood proud at the village heart, timber and stone gleaming under the midday sun. A banner, stitched by Sif and Bruni, fluttered above the door: a hammer crossed with a sheaf of barley.

That evening, the villagers packed the tavern for its first night. Mugs clashed together, ale flowed freely, and Mirra's flute sang through the smoky air. Laughter rolled out across the fields, and for once, there was no fear, no worry—only the strong, simple joy of a village built by their own hands, standing steady and proud under the watchful stars.

The afternoon sun beat down on Birchgrove, warm and pleasant, when a lone rider thundered into the village square. Dust rose in thick clouds behind the heavy hooves of his massive horse, and at once the cheerful clatter of work and laughter fell into a tense, watchful silence.

The rider was clad in the dark blue and silver of King Almund's guard, chainmail gleaming under a long cloak. His sharp eyes scanned the village like a hawk searching for prey. He reined in his horse hard, dismounting with a clank of steel.

"I am Sergeant Varric of the King's Guard," he barked, his voice carrying across the square. "I seek answers regarding the disappearance of the King's registrar, Roderick."

Murmurs spread like wildfire among the villagers.

Varric strode forward, eyes narrowing. "A description was sent. A man of stout build, dark beard, rough manner. Witnesses from Osyrn claim to have seen such a man trading shortly after Roderick vanished."

Gili stiffened, his mouth tight around the stem of his pipe. His heart thudded heavily in his chest.

Without warning, Varric seized Borik Ironweave, a young dwarf lad of no more than twenty winters, tying his hands with rough cord.

"You'll answer questions at the garrison," Varric said sharply. "If you're innocent, you'll return."

Marta Ironweave rushed forward, tears streaming down her face.

"Please, sir! He's done nothin' wrong! Borik's a good lad—never hurt no one!"

Varric ignored her pleas, hoisting Borik onto the horse like a sack of barley. The boy's face was pale, his mouth working silently.

The villagers stood frozen, whispering in frightened tones, some with anger, some with fear.

Gili watched, guilt gnawing at his gut. He knew it was him they sought, not Borik. Yet he stayed silent, the weight of his secret pressing down like a mountain.

He turned away, unable to meet Marta's tearful gaze.

Back at his house, Gili descended into the cool darkness of his cellar. He grabbed a clay mug and filled it to the brim from the freshest barrel of dark ale. He downed the first in three great gulps, slamming it onto the table, ale spilling over the edges.

"Bah!" he croaked like a beast, pouring another and another, until four mugs were drained and his belly was heavy with drink. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, lit his pipe with shaking fingers, and sat for a long moment in the silence, staring into nothing.

After a while, he dragged himself upstairs. The soft cooing of his child reached his ears, and he crossed the room, gathering the little one into his thick arms. He cradled her gently, pressing his forehead to her tiny head, feeling the steady, innocent heartbeat that knew nothing of the dark choices of men.

"I'll make it right," he whispered hoarsely. "I swear it."

Meanwhile, outside the tavern, Orin was hard at work crafting the new sign. He set up a sturdy iron frame first, hammering heated metal into shape on his portable anvil with loud ringing blows that echoed down the street. Sparks flew each time he struck, the metal gradually bending into a wide, curved shape to cradle the sign.

Once the iron was shaped and cooled, Orin turned to the wooden part—a thick plank of oak sanded smooth. He carved into it carefully with a sharp knife, his movements sure and slow: a crude but proud image of a snarling boar, tusks gleaming, standing defiant.

Above the image, he burned the name into the wood with hot irons, letter by letter:

"Grumpy Boar"

The letters were deep and bold, blackened against the lighter oak.

When Gili came by later, leaning heavily on his walking stick and pipe still smoldering in his teeth, Orin presented the sign with a grunt.

"Name was yours to give," Orin said, wiping sweat from his brow.

Gili chuckled roughly, a deep, rumbling sound.

"The Grumpy Boar," he said, stroking his beard. "After that bloody beast that near took my leg... and near took my life."

The villagers laughed quietly, tension easing just a little after the dark events of the day. They helped hoist the sign above the tavern door, securing it with thick bolts. When it was done, it swung gently in the evening breeze, creaking slightly—a stubborn boar snarling against the twilight sky.

The Grumpy Boar was born, and with it, a new heart for the village.

Yet Gili's mind was heavy, and as he smoked into the night, he knew the troubles of kings and guilt would not leave Birchgrove in peace so easily.

In the dungeons of Helm City, far from the safe walls of Birchgrove, Borik Ironweave lay chained in a damp, rank cell, the stench of mold and blood thick in the air. His face was a ruin of bruises, his lip split, one eye swollen shut. The King's guards took turns working him over—fists, boots, clubs—breaking the lad slowly, methodically.



"You'll speak, dwarf," the captain snarled, slamming Borik's battered back against the stone wall. "Confess, and the pain stops."

Borik sobbed hoarsely, barely able to lift his head. Days of beatings, starvation, and endless threats had worn down even his dwarven stubbornness. His spirit cracked like a rotted beam under weight.

"I... I did it," he gasped through broken teeth. "I killed him... I killed Roderick..."

The guards sneered, satisfied. They dragged him before the city's magistrate the next morning, a broken shell of the proud lad he had once been. No proper trial was given. His confession, wrung from bleeding lips, was all they needed.

That very afternoon, the gallows were prepared.

The townsfolk of Helm gathered, whispering and jeering as Borik, half-dragged, half-walking, was led up the wooden steps. A rough rope was thrown around his neck, the executioner standing grim and silent beside him.

The magistrate read the charges aloud in a booming voice.

"By order of King Almund, for the murder of Roderick the King's Man, the accused is to hang by the neck until dead."

Borik wept openly now, his knees buckling.

The trapdoor opened. The rope snapped tight. And with a final, shuddering jerk, Borik Ironweave's short life came to a brutal end, all for a crime he never truly committed.

Back in Birchgrove, life stumbled on, though tensions simmered just beneath the surface.

One warm morning in the fields, Orin found Jon Fairfoot hammering a scythe into the rocky ground in frustration, the blade bent and ruined beyond use.

"You half-wit!" Orin bellowed, storming across the field, his face red as an autumn apple. He seized Jon by the collar, yanked him upright, and gave him a hard smack across the head with the flat of his hand.

"You ruin another tool, and I'll set your arse to grindstone duty for a month!" Orin roared. "These ain't toys! Work proper or don't work at all!"

Jon, rubbing his head and mumbling apologies, slunk off, leaving the broken scythe lying sadly in the dirt.

That evening, Gili and Orin sat outside the Grumpy Boar, mugs of dark ale in hand, watching the stars blink over the roofs of the village.

Gili leaned back heavily, smoke curling from his pipe.

"Too much trouble lately," he muttered.

Orin grunted, swirling his ale. "Since them newcomers came."

Gili stared into the dark, jaw set hard. "First Torek thievin'. Now this fool wreckin' tools. And there's whispers of other foolishness brewin'."

"Aye," Orin said. "We built this place with blood and sweat. I'll not see it crumble under folk who don't know the worth of hard work."

They sat in heavy silence for a moment, the low murmur of the tavern behind them.

Gili tapped his pipe against the table and spoke quietly.

"If it don't straighten out soon," he said, "we send 'em packin'. Birchgrove's for folk who work true, not for those who bring ruin and shame."

Orin nodded grimly, raising his mug.

"To Birchgrove," he said.

Gili raised his mug too, the mugs clinking with a deep, hollow sound, like stones striking stones. They drank, the taste of ale bitter on their tongues, and the future of their hard-earned home weighing heavily on their hearts.

Word of Borik's death reached Birchgrove a week later, carried on the lips of a passing merchant who had witnessed the hanging at Helm City. Marta Ironweave stood frozen in the village square as the grim tale unfolded, the laughter and bustle of the morning falling to a stunned, dead silence around her.

She shook her head violently, hands clenching into trembling fists.

"Ye lie!" she cried out. "Borik... my Borik wouldn't—he couldn't—!"

No one spoke. No one could meet her eyes. She collapsed to her knees in the dust, wailing a sound so raw and heartbroken that it seemed to tear the very air apart.

In the days that followed, Marta wandered like a ghost through the village, barely speaking. She spent hours in the mill, running her hands across the grinding stones with vacant eyes, or by the riverbank, sitting motionless, staring into the rushing water as if seeking her son in its depths.

Then one morning, before the first rooster had even crowed, Marta climbed the narrow wooden walkway to the mill's waterwheel. Alone in the grey mist of dawn, she stepped between the great turning paddles—and let the current take her.

Her body was found later that morning, tangled in the weeds downstream. It took six men to haul her lifeless form onto the bank. Her face was strangely peaceful, as if she had finally joined her son in whatever halls awaited beyond this life.

The villagers, grim and silent, dug her grave in the village's small cemetery, where already Selda and Bram rested beneath simple stones. They laid Marta to rest with heavy hearts, placing a great flat stone upon her grave, her name carved into it by Orin's rough, skilled hands.



Gili stood by the grave, pipe clamped between his teeth, and said nothing. There were no words big enough to shoulder that much sorrow.

A few days after the burial, Dagen Ironweave, Marta's only surviving son, came to Gili's door with a small pack slung over his shoulder.

"I can't stay," he said simply, his voice hollow. "Too many ghosts here now."

Gili clapped a hand on his shoulder, saying only, "May the road treat ye better than the hills."

And so Dagen walked away, another soul lost to the cost of hard living.

Life in Birchgrove, stubborn as it was, crawled onward.

Orin took it upon himself to teach Jon Fairfoot how to wield a scythe properly. Early in the mornings, before the heat of the sun, he dragged Jon to the fields.

"Not like you're swingin' a bloody axe," Orin barked, demonstrating the slow, sweeping motion. "You glide it. Like ye're shavin' the beard off a drunk!"

Jon fumbled and sweated, but slowly, day after day, he began to improve.

The women tended to the animals with a quiet devotion. Sif and Bruni repaired hen pens, fed the goats and mules, and milked the cows and sheep, singing old songs under their breath to keep the work lively.

Pula went out into the woods with his bow and spear, spending two days tracking. On the third morning, he returned triumphantly, dragging a fat, wild boar behind him, its tusks cracked and muddy.

"Feast tonight," he said simply, dropping the beast in the center of the square, drawing grins from tired faces.

Meanwhile, Gili, needing time to clear his thoughts, took his sieve and went down to the riverbank. He worked slowly, sifting the cold, wet sand, the sun warm on his back. Time passed in silence save for the rushing of the river and the soft whisper of sand falling through the mesh.

He found nothing that day—not a glint of gold, not even a nugget of iron. Still, he sat there on the riverbank a while longer, pipe clenched in his teeth, smoke curling lazily into the clear blue sky.

He watched the water flow by, carrying away stones and silt alike, and thought grimly to himself, *Some things, once carried away, never come back.*

The river rolled on, uncaring, as Birchgrove licked its wounds and fought to hold onto the life they had carved out of rock and sorrow.

The morning air was crisp, but tension crackled hotter than a forge fire in Birchgrove. Orin was hammering away at the anvil outside his smithy, shaping a fresh batch of axe heads for

the village. The clang of steel on steel rang sharp in the square when he noticed something amiss.

There, in the corner of the smithy, lay two ruined axe heads, twisted and useless—along with a hammer left poorly balanced on the anvil.

Orin's face darkened like a thundercloud. He turned and bellowed across the square.

"Dorrik! You clumsy sack of stone, get your arse over here!"

Dorrik Stonehand, hearing his name, came stomping over from the mill, wiping his hands on his trousers.

"What in the hells ye shoutin' about, old man?" Dorrik barked.

"You bloody touched my anvil, that's what!" Orin roared, jabbing a thick finger at the twisted metal. "You ain't no smith! You butchered good iron like it was a rotten pig's head!"

Dorrik squared his shoulders, scowling.

"I needed an axe! You take too bloody long hammerin' your fancy curves! I know how to bang metal well enough!"

Orin slammed his hammer onto the anvil with a crash, making both men flinch.

"Bangin' ain't forgery, you ignorant mule! You don't touch another smith's anvil without askin' unless ye got a death wish!"

Tempers flared hotter by the second. Before Orin could step forward, Harn, Dorrik's broad-shouldered son, charged across the square with fists swinging.

"You don't talk to my da like that, you shriveled old goat!"

Harn aimed a wild punch at Orin's jaw, but the older dwarf ducked neatly, grabbed Harn by the belt, and hurled him into the dirt with a heavy thud. The younger dwarf scrambled up, throwing another swing, but Orin met him with a heavy boot to the chest, sending Harn sprawling again.

"Had enough, whelp?" Orin snarled, standing over him.

The square was alive with shouts now, villagers rushing from their homes to see the fight.

Gili came charging from the Grumpy Boar, his face thunderous, pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Enough of this pissin' contest!" he bellowed, grabbing Orin by the shoulder and dragging him back. He turned on Dorrik, jabbing a thick finger into the dwarf's chest. "Ye brought this on yerself, Dorrik! You touch another man's forge without askin', you get your arse handed to ye!"

Dorrik snarled but held his tongue—for the moment.

The day limped forward after the scuffle, but trouble was just warming up.

That evening, drunk and brooding, Dorrik slammed ale after ale down his gullet in the Grumpy Boar. He grew louder and angrier with every gulp, until at last he roared, flipping a heavy table clean over with a crash, mugs and plates shattering across the floor.

"Ye think yer better than me!" he shouted into the room. "You lot sittin' high and mighty!"

Gili, having had enough, stomped across the tavern.

"You'll sit down and shut up, or you'll lie down and shut up," he said, voice low and full of menace.

Dorrik, red-eyed and swaying, swung a clumsy punch. Gili ducked easily and landed a heavy fist right into Dorrik's gut, doubling him over with a gasp. A second punch to the side of the head sent the dwarf sprawling onto the floor, groaning.

Gili stood over him, chest heaving.

"Anyone else want a turn?" he barked to the stunned crowd.

No one moved.

The next morning, Dorrik, bruised and hungover, was dragged from his bed by Gili and Pula.

"You wrecked the tavern, you fix it," Gili growled. "Every table, every bench, and you do it proper."

All day Dorrik hammered and nailed under Pula's watchful eye, muttering curses with every plank he straightened.

As the village settled back into its rhythm, a small wagon rolled into the square. A thin, wiry merchant with a wide-brimmed hat climbed down, calling out in a sing-song voice.

"Goods for trade! Fine cloth, cured meat, iron nails, sweet mead!"

Villagers gathered around, bartering and chatting eagerly.

But no one noticed the small rat that climbed off the back of the merchant's cart, its nose twitching. It scurried unseen toward the pens, slipping between the stones and under the wooden rails.

It vanished among the straw, hidden, silent.

Gili, arms crossed, watched the merchant hawk his wares but kept half an eye on everything, his gut still tight with unease. Birchgrove had survived worse—but Gili knew well enough: trouble had a way of creeping in when you least expected it.

## The Clever Intruder

The weeks passed heavy with labor and sweat, but dark clouds had been gathering unseen over Birchgrove. It began small—a mule growing thin and sluggish, its coat patchy and dull. Gili and Pula did what they could, bringing fresh water and barley mash, but the animal grew weaker by the hour until it finally collapsed in the pen one morning and never rose again.

"Poor brute," Gili muttered, scratching his beard as they stared down at it. "Worked its heart out for us."

They buried the mule behind the barn, a grim, quiet task.

Then, the birds started dropping. At first, it was a few hens found cold and stiff in the morning light, but soon others began to show signs—glassy eyes, twitching limbs. It was then that the first whispers began.

Jon Fairfoot, always quick with his tongue, cornered Dorrik by the pens.

"You!" he spat, jabbing a finger at him. "You've been tendin' the beasts! You poisoned 'em, didn't ye? Some twisted payback for Gili's knock?"

Dorrik, still bruised from that drunken night weeks ago, squared his shoulders and growled.

"You watch that tongue, halfling," he snarled. "I've done nothin' but work meself to the bone to keep this village fed!"

Voices rose, shouts filling the square. It looked for a moment that fists would fly again until Gili stepped between them, his voice sharp as a sword's edge.

"Enough! We got bigger problems than yer waggin' mouths!"

And indeed, worse came swiftly.

First Dorrik himself fell ill—feverish, shaking, his face pale and soaked in sweat. Then Harn, strong and full of anger days before, collapsed in the mill yard, coughing and vomiting. Ella Fairfoot soon followed, burning up and unable to stand without retching.

Boils as big as a thumb sprouted on their necks and under their arms, red and angry, throbbing with foul humors. The village knew then, without needing words: plague had come to Birchgrove.

"The Black Death..." Bruni whispered in horror, clutching her apron to her mouth.

Panic spread like wildfire.

Families barred their doors, hung cloth over their windows, and huddled inside their homes. No one dared visit neighbors. No one dared help the sick.

Gili gathered the healthy villagers into the square, standing a safe distance apart, his voice grim.

"We got no healer. No cure. Only way to stop this is to keep 'em apart."

Reluctantly, the villagers agreed.

Gili, Orin, and Pula, faces wrapped in cloth soaked with vinegar, carried Dorrik, Harn, and Ella to the empty house at the edge of the village—the one Marta Ironweave had once lived in. They placed what food they could spare inside: barley bread, smoked meat, buckets of clean water.

They locked the door from the outside, hearts heavy, knowing they might be sentencing their friends to die alone.

Inside, Dorrik moaned weakly, Harn coughed wetly, and Ella whimpered like a child in fevered dreams.

"Gods forgive us," Sif whispered, holding Gili's hand tightly.

Gili had no time to mourn. He had work to do.

Seeing more birds stagger in the pens, their feathers patchy and eyes clouded, he steeled himself.

"Can't take the risk," he said, voice rough.

One by one, he culled the sick birds, swift and merciless. Blood soaked the earth behind the pens. Then he turned to the sheep—one ewe, standing apart, swaying on unsteady legs, foam flecking her mouth.

Gili drew his knife, whispering an apology under his breath, and ended her suffering with one quick stroke.

He and Orin dug a pit deep in the forest, away from the village, and buried the carcasses in a mass grave. They covered it with stones and earth, marking the place with a heavy heart.

By nightfall, Birchgrove was a village of shuttered homes and silent prayers. The only sound was the moaning of the sick from the lonely house at the edge of town—and the grim resolve of those who remained, fighting to hold their crumbling world together.

"We'll get through it," Gili said to the empty square, pipe smoke curling into the cold night air. "By stone and by blood, we'll get through it."

The house at the far edge of Birchgrove had become a place of sorrow and dread. Gili had hammered thick planks across the door, sealing it tight from the outside. No one approached it without reason, and even then, they kept well back, tossing food or water buckets through a small hatch cut into the door without daring to see inside.

Inside, Dorrik, Harn, and Ella lived—or rather, suffered—through their own private hell. Days and nights blurred together in a fevered nightmare of heat, sweat, vomit, and delirious moaning. Sometimes, their cries pierced the stillness of the village, a pitiful sound that made grown men turn away with tears in their eyes.

Weeks crawled past.

First, Ella's weak voice fell silent. The poor halfling girl, barely old enough to have known much of life, passed away curled in a corner, clutching a scrap of cloth like a doll.

Harn raved and raged, clawing at the walls and screaming until his voice broke. He died two days after Ella, body rigid and twisted with fever.

Dorrik, stubborn and strong to the end, held on the longest. His groans dwindled over days into pitiful whimpers. Then, silence.

For a full week after the sounds from the house ceased, Gili ordered no one to approach it, letting time and the gods do their work.

At last, Gili, Orin, and Pula stood outside the house, faces grim and covered with cloths soaked in vinegar. Gili pried the planks loose with a crowbar, the wood groaning in protest.

The stench that rolled out was like a living thing, foul enough to make strong men stagger. Inside, the three bodies lay bloated and rotting in the dim light.



"Get it done," Gili muttered through gritted teeth.

They moved quickly. Working in silence but for the occasional gag and grunt, they hauled the bodies out, loaded them onto a wagon covered in old cloths, and pulled them to the village graveyard.

Three open graves waited, dug the day before when it became clear the worst had happened.

They lowered the bodies into the earth, shoveling the dirt back over them with heavy, weary arms. The village gathered at a distance, heads bowed, no songs sung this time—only heavy silence and the sharp, cold sound of soil falling onto wood.

Bruni whispered the only words spoken aloud.

"May their souls find peace."

Time passed slowly after the plague's bite, but little by little, life clawed its way back into Birchgrove.

The fields needed tending again. The animals needed feeding. Grain needed grinding.

Kendric took up work repairing fences. Bruni and Sif tended the goats and birds, keeping a sharp eye for any sign of illness. Orin returned to his forge, the hammer ringing again over the village like a heartbeat.

Gili spent his days mostly in the fields or by the river, rebuilding their stores, growing wary and harder. When the same merchant who had once brought trouble came rolling up the road weeks later, Gili was waiting for him at the village edge, arms crossed, pipe burning low.

"You turn that cart around," Gili said coldly. "Ain't no trade for you here no more."

The merchant protested, waving his arms and shouting about fair trade and need.

Gili stepped forward, close enough that the merchant flinched.

"I said go," he growled. "Or you'll find out how dwarves deal with snakes."

Without another word, the merchant whipped his horses around and left Birchgrove in a cloud of dust.

News trickled in through occasional travelers, and none of it was good.

Whole villages wiped clean by the plague. Farmsteads abandoned. In one larger city, over half the population had perished, the streets choked with bodies and the stench of death so strong that even the rats fled.

Around the fire one evening at the Grumpy Boar, the villagers sat huddled, mugs in hand, voices low.

"It's like the end of the bloody world," Pula muttered, staring into his ale.

"Not our world," Gili said, his voice a solid weight in the room. "We'll hold fast. Stone endures. Birchgrove endures."

And though fear still lurked behind every smile, and sorrow etched new lines in their faces, the villagers nodded. Because Gili spoke the truth.

Against storm, steel, or sickness, Birchgrove would endure.

As the months stretched on and no more signs of plague darkened Birchgrove's doorstep, life slowly began to return to its steady, hard-working rhythm. The fear that had clutched the village's heart loosened, replaced by cautious hope. With time, the people dared to open their doors wide once more and even welcome the occasional merchant into their midst, though Gili was clear with every traveler who rolled up their wagon:

"We sell more than we buy," he'd say firmly, pipe smoke curling from his mouth. "And you sleep outside the gates, not in."

The villagers had grown tougher, wiser. They traded flour, smoked meats, hides, and Gili's strong dark ale. Goods, not gossip, passed through Birchgrove now.

One bright afternoon in early harvest, two more dwarf families arrived, seeking a place to settle. The first was a potter, a strong-willed woman named Maela Claybrow with her two young boys, Thorek and Varn. They had traveled from the western hills after their village was abandoned, carrying what few belongings they could salvage.

The second was a broad-shouldered, dark-bearded man named Borin Stonefoot, a stonemason of fine skill, with a hammer slung across his back and quiet pride in his voice.

Gili met them at the village edge, eyeing them carefully before giving a sharp nod.

"We've room and we've need. You work, you eat."

"Aye, we'll pull our weight," Maela said, clasping Gili's arm in the old dwarven way.

"And we'll make this place stronger yet," Borin promised, his voice low and sure.

They fit into Birchgrove as neatly as a stone into a wall. Maela set up a small pottery beside the river where the best clay was to be found. Soon her strong hands shaped plates, jars, bottles, and fine vases from the earth, her kiln sending sweet-smelling smoke into the village air. Her goods were tough as dwarven bone and beautiful too—etched with curling mountain designs and knotwork.

Borin wasted no time either. He gathered stones from the riverbank and the surrounding fields, stacking them with precision and care. In a few weeks, he built a grand entrance arch at the mouth of the village path: two thick stone pillars capped with a carved keystone, etched with the image of a great birch tree flanked by crossed hammers.

"Let all who come here know Birchgrove is no fleeting camp," Borin said, standing back to admire his handiwork. "It's a home built to last."



The village felt a little prouder after that.

Come the harvest, a great festival was planned—one that would chase away the last shadows of sickness with laughter, food, and firelight.

Tables groaned under the weight of roasted boar, fresh bread, thick stews, honeyed apples, and mugs overflowing with ale. Children raced about underfoot, playing games with sticks and stones. Songs filled the night sky, and even the gruffest dwarves laughed and clapped along.

Gili, standing before the stone altar they had raised at the clearing behind his house, called the villagers to gather in solemn thanks.

He stood tall, his pipe tucked away, his beard freshly combed, a simple carved stone pendant of the earth gods around his neck.

"We owe more than we can name," Gili said, his voice echoing across the quiet field. "To the stones beneath our feet, to the rivers that fed us, to the old gods who heard our cries when the black death came knockin'."

He raised his hands toward the stone altar, the villagers bowing their heads.

"By stone and soil, by seed and steel, by breath of earth and strength of arm—we honor thee. Keep us strong. Keep us steady. Let Birchgrove stand forever!"

The villagers responded with a booming cheer, hands thudding their chests or raising mugs skyward.

From that day forward, Gili began holding weekly gatherings at the altar, small ceremonies of thanks and prayer. It wasn't about fancy words or polished rites—it was about remembering their roots, their blood, and the stone-hard truth that survival was never given, only earned.

And Birchgrove, battered and scarred, but proud and stubborn as ever, grew into its new life under the steady gaze of its mountains and the iron will of its people.

## **The Princess**

It was a clear morning when Gili slung his pickaxe over his shoulder and set off toward the pits. The air was cool, the earth firm under his boots, and the smell of pine and fresh river water filled his lungs. He was halfway across the meadow when he spotted it—a broken wagon up ahead, lying like a dead beast, the horses collapsed in the dirt.

Gili's pace quickened, suspicion prickling at the back of his neck.

When he got closer, he saw something that made him stop dead in his tracks.

A woman lay trapped under one of the wagon wheels, her fine dress torn and stained with mud. On her golden hair sat a crooked but unmistakable circlet—a crown. She was moaning weakly, her face twisted in pain.

Gili cursed under his breath, throwing his pickaxe aside. He grabbed the side of the wagon and heaved, muscles straining, until he managed to lift the heavy wheel enough for the woman to scramble free, crawling through the mud with tears streaming down her cheeks.



She collapsed onto her knees, sobbing.

"My dress! It's ruined! I cannot go back to the city like this !" she cried, lifting the filthy hem as if unable to believe it.

Gili, still panting from the effort, barked a rough laugh.

"Better a dirty dress than a crushed skull, lass."

She looked up at him, indignation flaring despite her bedraggled state.

"I am Princess Elira of House Valemont! You'll show respect!"

Gili scratched his beard, smearing some mud on his cheek.

"Aye, and I'm Gili of Birchgrove. Now get yerself together, Your Highness. No one'll be bowin' if yer dead."

He strode to the horses, which were groaning but alive. Grabbing the whip from the wagon, he snapped it sharply above their heads. The startled beasts scrambled to their hooves, tossing mud and broken harnesses as they whinnied in protest.

Gili threw a hand back toward the wagon.

"Up ye go, Princess. We'll get ye patched up."

Elira climbed clumsily into the battered wagon, wrapping her muddy arms around herself. Gili clambered up next to her, clicked his tongue at the horses, and off they went toward Birchgrove.

When they rolled into the village, jaws dropped all around.

There was Gili—mud-smeared, scowling—and beside him, a dripping, weeping princess in ruined finery.

Kendric leaned against the common house, pipe dangling from his mouth.

"What's this then?" he muttered. "Gili taken up kidnappin'?"

Pula chuckled darkly. "Looks like he beat a royal outta the woods!"

The villagers laughed and whispered, but Gili ignored them. He drove straight to his house, jumped down, and helped the princess from the wagon.

"Easy, Your Mudjesty," he grunted.

Inside his home, he called out.

"Sif! Get down here! Got a mess need cleanin'!"

Sif, carrying their daughter on her hip, appeared at the doorway, blinking in confusion.

"What in nine hells have you dragged home now?" she asked, staring at the dripping, noble wreck that was Princess Elira.

"This one's a princess," Gili said, deadpan. "Dress needs washin'. Give her one of the clean sheets to wear meanwhile."

Sif's eyebrows shot up into her hairline.

"Aye, Gili. And will I be ironin' the royal underpants next?"

Gili snorted a laugh, tossing a rag onto a hook.

"Only if ye want to be titled 'Mistress of Mud'."

Sif shook her head, muttering something about madmen and fools, but bustled off to fetch a clean linen sheet. She handed it to the princess, who looked at it with visible disgust.

"You want dry or you want dead, lass?" Gili said, crossing his arms.

Princess Elira, cheeks burning with humiliation, snatched the sheet and disappeared behind the bedroom curtain to change.



Gili, wiping mud from his boots, looked at Sif and grinned.

"Can't say life in Birchgrove's ever dull, eh?"

Sif smirked, folding her arms.

"No, love. With you about, it's never dull. It's a bloody circus."

Outside, curious villagers clustered in knots, whispering and chuckling. The story of the muddy princess spread faster than fire through dry hay, and Birchgrove was alive with laughter once more—even if it came with a heavy helping of disbelief.

The day passed slowly, thick with the hum of drying clothes and the occasional whinny of restless horses. Sif spent nearly an hour outside, bent over a steaming tub, scrubbing the delicate silk of Elira's fine dress with a mix of river water and harsh lye soap. Her arms ached by the time she finally wrung the dress out and hung it carefully over a taut rope strung between two sturdy birch trees.

Inside, Gili and the princess sat stiffly at his rough-hewn wooden table. He had pushed a clay cup of water and a plate of bread and cheese toward her, but Elira shook her head politely.

"Thank you, Master Gili, but I'll not eat just yet," she said, her voice now much calmer, almost gentle.

Gili shrugged and pulled the jug of dark ale closer to himself, filling a mug to the brim. He took a long gulp, wiped the foam from his beard with the back of his hand, and lit his pipe, smoke curling lazily toward the rafters.

Elira folded her hands in her lap, eyeing the small home with curiosity.

"You live simply here," she said, a small smile touching her lips. "But... there's a strength to it. Do you and your people lack for anything?"

Gili leaned back, puffing thoughtfully on his pipe.

"We get by," he said after a moment. "Fields give barley and wheat. River gives fish. Pits give iron and coal. Built it all ourselves, stone by bloody stone."

Elira's eyes glinted with interest.

"If there is anything the high lords of Valemont ought to know, anything you need—say, better tools, more livestock—speak it. Perhaps I could... whisper a word."

Gili chuckled, a deep rumble from his chest.

"Last time we had high lords sniffin' round here, they only wanted to take what little we had," he said. "But... if you're askin' straight, better iron for our smith and good seed grain wouldn't go amiss."

Elira nodded solemnly, tucking that knowledge away.

For the next few hours, they sat and talked—Gili telling stories of plowing fields, fighting goblins, building the tavern with bare hands and bloody knuckles. Elira in turn spoke of life behind stone walls and marble halls: endless feasts, politics sharp as knives, and rules about what dress to wear depending on the bloody phase of the moon.

"Sounds exhausting," Gili said with a grin, pouring another mug of ale.

"It can be," Elira admitted with a small laugh, "but... sometimes I think your life here, rough as it is, is more honest."

As the afternoon waned, Sif came in carrying the now clean and dry dress, folded carefully over her arms. She handed it to Elira with a small nod.

"Here ye are, Princess. Smells like soap and river air."

Elira rose, taking the dress with a thankful smile.

"You have my deepest gratitude," she said, curtsying awkwardly in the too-big linen sheet. "I'll go change, if you'll excuse me."

She disappeared behind the curtain again, and a few minutes later reemerged, looking once again like royalty—though her hair was still tangled and her shoes caked with dried mud.

She stepped forward, holding out her hands.

"Master Gili. Mistress Sif. I swear I will repay this kindness. You have my word."

Gili snorted lightly but nodded, clamping his pipe between his teeth.

"Just don't send the King's taxmen sniffin' round," he said, grinning.

Elira laughed, a clear, ringing sound that made even Sif crack a smile.

"You're safe from that—for now," Elira said.

They stepped outside, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows. Gili helped her up onto the wagon, tightening the reins in her hands.

"You sure you can handle it, Princess?" he asked, one brow raised.

Elira gave him a playful look, flicking the reins with a practiced snap.

"I'll manage. Thank you again, Gili of Birchgrove."

She clucked her tongue at the horses, and the wagon rattled away down the road, dust rising behind her. Villagers stood along the edges, watching in awe as the muddy princess rode off into the setting sun.

Gili stood there for a moment, hands on his hips, pipe smoke drifting from his lips.

Sif came to stand beside him.

"Well," she said, bumping him with her hip, "there's a tale for the tavern tonight."

"Aye," Gili said, chuckling. "Birchgrove: home of muddy princesses and stubborn dwarves."

And together, they watched the road until the wagon disappeared over the hill.

It was a calm afternoon in Birchgrove when the clattering of hooves echoed down the village road. Gili, seated at his rough wooden table, was halfway through a mug of thick dark ale when a heavy knock rattled his door.

Grumbling, Gili set down the mug with a thump, wiped the foam from his mustache, and stomped to the door.

Standing outside was a rider clad in polished armor, his tabard bearing the symbol of House Valemont—a silver tree entwined with a golden crown. He held a leather pouch in one gauntleted hand.

"Master Gili?" the rider said, voice brisk.

"Aye, that's me," Gili said, squinting up at the man.

"I am a special envoy of Princess Elira. Her Highness sends this as repayment for your aid."

The rider thrust the pouch into Gili's hands, bowed quickly, and without another word turned his horse and rode back down the village road, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

Gili shut the door with his foot and brought the heavy pouch to the table. Sif appeared from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron.

"What's that?" she asked, curious.

Gili said nothing, only untied the leather cord and tipped the contents out onto the table. A glittering cascade of coins spilled out—bright silver and shining gold.

"By the stones," Gili muttered, eyes wide.

Inside were **120 gold pieces** and **300 silver pieces**, each stamped with the royal mark of Valemont.

Sif gasped softly. "Enough to buy another herd of goats and a new forge besides."

Gili grinned, a rare, wolfish smile.

"Or enough to finally put a roof over the tavern kitchen," he said, chuckling.

They carefully divided the coins, stashing them in hidden places around the house and cellar. Life resumed its steady beat after that, the villagers busy with harvests, repairs, and tending their growing flocks. Gili worked the fields, hammered nails, sipped ale at the Grumpy Boar, and helped Orin fit iron bands to new barrels.

Weeks passed in the comforting rhythm of village life.

Until, one morning, the sound of hooves once again broke the peace.

The same armored rider arrived, dust-caked and weary. This time, he dismounted slowly and handed Gili a wax-sealed letter, the crimson mark of House Valemont pressed firmly into the seal.

"From Her Highness," the rider said.

Gili broke the seal with a thick thumb, unrolling the parchment and reading aloud, Sif leaning over his shoulder.

"Master Gili of Birchgrove," it began, in the flowing, careful hand of Elira. "I call upon you once more, not for charity, but for trust. Beneath the city of Helm, in ancient vaults long forgotten by most, lie relics of dwarven kind, brought here in ages past. There are whispers—whispers of men who would steal or destroy them. Helm City has no dwarves to care for these treasures. I need a protector. I need you. If your spirit yet holds the stubborn will I saw in Birchgrove, ride to me. I will see you rewarded."

Gili finished reading, the words sinking heavy into his bones.

Sif looked at him, a crease between her brows. "You're thinkin' about it."

"I am," Gili said, folding the letter carefully. "No one else to stand for our kind. Can't leave our past to rot under city stones."

Sif sighed, smoothing her hand over his arm.

"Then go," she said quietly. "But come back to us."

That afternoon, Gili strapped on his sword, buckled his traveling boots, and packed his bag with dried meat, a hunk of cheese, a waterskin of ale, a blanket, and his old, faithful pipe.

He saddled the village's only horse—a sturdy brown beast they'd named Stonetooth—and slung his gear across its back.

Pula, Orin, and a handful of others gathered to see him off.

"Don't get stabbed in some dark alley," Orin grunted, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Or start a brawl in the princess's name," Pula added, smirking.

Gili swung into the saddle, the leather creaking.

"I'll see this through," he said, gripping the reins. "Stone endures. So do we."

He kicked Stonetooth into a trot, riding down the dusty road, past the stone arch Borin had built, past the waving fields of barley and wheat. As the village fell behind him and the mountains loomed far off in the distance, Gili pulled his pipe from his belt and lit it.

"Praise the old gods," he muttered to the smoke, "and guide me true."

And with the wind at his back and the road unfolding before him, Gili rode toward Helm City, toward duty, toward danger—and whatever destiny the stones of the world had carved out for him.

Gili traveled for two long, hard days along winding roads and rocky trails, the horizon stretching endlessly before him. The horse, Stonetooth, trotted steadily, hooves thudding against dirt and stone. At night, Gili found a thicket of bushes off the road, tied the horse to a low tree branch, and bedded down under the stars with only a blanket for warmth. The wind whispered through the grass, and Gili puffed his pipe slowly, staring into the black sky.

"Ain't no soft beds where the real work gets done," he muttered to himself before letting sleep drag him down.

By mid-afternoon on the second day, Gili finally laid eyes on Helm City. It rose from the plain like a weary giant, its high walls cracked in places but stubbornly standing, towers leaning slightly but refusing to fall. The city had once been mighty—he could see it in the grandeur of its broad gates and the faded banners snapping in the breeze—but now it wore the scars of time and hardship like an old warrior.

The city streets were full of life: merchants crying out their wares, beggars clutching at cloaks, armored guards pacing wearily. Stonetooth's hooves clattered on the cobbles as Gili made his way toward the noble quarter, where fine houses huddled behind carved gates and polished stone steps.



At a tall, ivy-draped manor near the edge of the district, Gili dismounted and knocked heavily on the oak door. A servant answered, wide-eyed at the sight of the mud-caked dwarf.

"I'm here for Princess Elira," Gili said gruffly, showing the royal seal she had given him.

The servant bowed low and rushed to fetch her.

Moments later, Elira herself appeared in the doorway, dressed not in finery this time but in simple, practical clothes—a fitted tunic and leather boots. Her face lit up when she saw him.

"Master Gili! By the gods, you came."

"Aye," Gili said, giving a slight nod. "Took a while, but here I am. What's the trouble, lass?"

Elira ushered him inside, into a room where maps and dusty tomes lay strewn over a heavy oak table.

"There's a vault beneath Helm," she explained, her voice hushed. "Long ago, when dwarven clans still walked these lands, they brought relics here during the Last Great March—ancestral axes, heirloom rings, war banners from the Mountain Holds. They trusted the human kings to guard them."

She shook her head, anger flashing in her eyes.

"But now, the city is crumbling. Thieves and greedy fools lurk in every shadow. If those relics are stolen or destroyed, dwarven honor will be lost—and with it, a piece of history no one can replace."

Gili listened intently, his broad hands folded over his chest.

"Then we guard 'em. With stone and blood if need be."

Elira smiled warmly.

"I knew you'd understand. Come—I'll show you the way."

She led him through twisting side streets and into a hidden stairway carved into the city's foundations. Down they went, torchlight flickering off damp stone walls, the air growing colder and heavier with each step.

At the bottom lay the catacombs: a labyrinth of dark tunnels, ancient crypts, and forgotten halls. Elira led him to a heavy iron door set into the stone—a simple, solid barrier without ornament.

Inside, Gili glimpsed treasures beyond counting: massive war-axes etched with forgotten runes, banners stitched with gold thread so old they seemed ready to crumble at a touch, jeweled rings nestled in velvet-lined boxes, and shields bearing the marks of legendary dwarven heroes.

He whistled low.

"By the Stone Fathers... this is worth more than a king's ransom."

Elira placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I trust you, Gili. Guard it well. I'll check on you when I can, but you'll be alone down here most nights."

Gili nodded, his eyes hard as granite.

"They'll have to walk over my corpse to get to it."

With that, Elira left him to his duty, the heavy door booming shut behind her.

Gili wasted no time. He dragged a few crates into a corner, laid out his blanket, and set up a small lantern to keep the shadows at bay. His sword lay across his knees as he sat, pipe in mouth, surveying the gloom with sharp, wary eyes.

The first day passed in silence, broken only by the occasional drip of water from the ceiling and the distant rumble of the city above. Gili prowled the chamber at regular intervals, checking every corner, every shadow.

When evening fell, he settled against the wall, pipe glowing faintly in the dark.



"Come on then, ye bastards," he muttered to the darkness, a grim smile tugging at his mouth. "See what Birchgrove's finest has for ye."

The catacombs were silent, but Gili kept his watch sharp, knowing well enough that peace in a place like this never lasted long.

Back in Birchgrove, Orin paced back and forth across the square like a caged bear, his hands clenching and unclenching around the haft of a hammer he wasn't even working with. Pula leaned against the wall of the Grumpy Boar, arms crossed, a worried scowl on his face.

"This ain't sittin' right with me," Orin growled. "Gili off in that cursed city alone, guardin' treasures no man's seen in a hundred years. What if he gets himself in a bind?"

Pula nodded grimly. "He's a tough bastard, aye, but even Gili can't guard a whole bloody vault alone if trouble comes knockin'."

They stared at each other for a moment. No words needed. They knew what had to be done.

By that afternoon, they had packed up the sturdy village wagon with food, waterskins, and tools. Orin strapped on his battered armor, and Pula shouldered his bow and spear. They hitched up the mule—a shaggy, stubborn beast named Greytoe—and set off down the road toward Helm City.

The mule, true to its nature, made every mile a test of patience.

Two days in, halfway along a rocky stretch of path, Greytoe decided he'd had enough. He stopped dead in the road, dug in his hooves, and with an impressive grunt, dropped a steaming pile of dung right in front of the wagon.

"Move, you lazy sod!" Orin barked, snapping the reins.

Greytoe flicked his ears and didn't budge an inch.

Orin cursed under his breath, climbed down, and grabbed a switch from the roadside. He whipped the beast's hindquarters with a few firm smacks, bellowing, "If I have to drag ye to the city by your tail, I'll do it, ye miserable pile of bones!"

Finally, with a sullen snort, the mule lurched forward, nearly throwing Pula off the wagon seat.

"Remind me why we didn't take two horses?" Pula muttered darkly.

"Because we don't have two bloody horses," Orin snapped.

Meanwhile, deep beneath Helm City, Gili's watch dragged on. Day and night blurred together in the cold, damp catacombs. He ate little, smoked often, and kept his sword ever within reach.

The first two days passed without trouble, only the distant sounds of the living city rumbling above like a distant storm.

But on the third evening, as Gili sat cross-legged against the stone wall, his pipe ember glowing in the gloom, he heard it—rustling. A scraping of boot against stone.

He was on his feet in an instant, sword drawn, eyes scanning the shadows.

The noise stopped.

Gili waited, body tense, heart hammering in his chest. Minutes crawled by.

Then, like a snake sliding from a crack, a shadow detached itself from the darkness—thin, wiry, a man with a long knife glinting dully in one hand.

The thief stepped forward, voice low and sneering.

"Step aside, dwarf," he hissed. "Ain't worth dying over dusty old junk."

Gili barked a harsh laugh, raising his sword.

"Ye picked the wrong vault, lad. Come for it if ye've got the stones."

The thief snarled and lunged, knife flashing in the dim light.

Gili met him head-on. Steel clanged against steel, the clash echoing down the tunnels. The thief was fast, dodging and weaving, but Gili had the weight and stubbornness of a mountain behind him.

A sharp sting flared in Gili's leg—knife cutting a deep slice through his thigh. He grunted in pain, almost staggering.

"Cheap shot, you rat-bastard," he growled, baring his teeth.

Rage fueled him. With a roar, Gili swung his sword low and then upward in a brutal arc. The blade bit into the thief's side. The man screamed, stumbled back—and Gili didn't give him another chance.

One last thrust to the chest, and the thief fell heavily onto the stone floor, breath rattling, lifeblood pooling around him.

Gili staggered back against the wall, clutching his bleeding leg, grimacing as he slid down to sit.

"By the old gods..." he muttered, fishing a scrap of cloth from his pack to bind the wound. "Helm City's got rats worse than any pit."

He leaned his head back against the cold stone, pipe dangling forgotten from his lips, blood dripping steadily onto the floor.

The relics were safe. For now.

Orin and Pula rattled into Helm City on their rickety wagon, the mule Greytoe trotting lazily, unimpressed by the towering walls and bustling streets. The city was alive with noise and chaos: merchants shouting their wares, guards marching, urchins darting through the crowd.

"Where in nine hells are we supposed to find a princess in all this?" Pula muttered, tugging his cloak tighter around him.

"We ask," Orin grunted. "And if they don't listen, we shout louder."

They spent hours weaving through the streets, asking wary townsfolk about Princess Elira. Most shrugged them off, a few pointed them in the right direction, until at last they found themselves outside a tall manor adorned with creeping ivy and faded banners.

A bored-looking guard leaned against the gate, arms crossed over his chest. He took one look at the dusty, travel-worn dwarves and smirked.

"No visitors. Move along, stonestubbers."

Orin's fists clenched at his sides, his face turning a dangerous shade of red.

"We ain't visitors, ye daft sack of hay," he barked. "We're looking for a man. Dwarf. Came by with a horse. Met with your lady. Small but built like a mountain and probably scowlin' like he'd bite your leg off."

The guard chuckled, but then his brow furrowed slightly.

"Aye... now you mention it, I do remember a dwarf like that. Hard to miss, the grumpy little sod. Her Highness sent him down to the catacombs, under the city."

"Catacombs?" Pula said, glancing at Orin.

Orin spat into the street and nodded.

"Figures. Gili always finds the darkest hole to crawl into."

Thanking the guard with a grunt, they set off, following vague directions through twisting alleys and down half-collapsed stairways until they found a narrow entrance half-hidden behind an old chapel, moss and rot thick around the stones.

"Right cheerful place," Pula muttered, lighting a torch.

They descended into the tunnels, the air turning cold and damp, the walls closing in around them. Their boots echoed hollowly on the stone, and more than once Pula thought he saw something skittering just out of the torchlight.

Hours passed as they wandered, calling Gili's name quietly, their weapons drawn and eyes wary.

At last, far down a branching tunnel, they spotted a dim glow.

They crept closer, steps silent on the slick stone floor.

In the flickering pool of lantern light sat Gili, back against a wall, sword lying across his knees, pipe clamped between his teeth. He smoked in utter stillness, eyes half-lidded but sharp.

As they approached, Gili looked up, and a rare, wide grin split his face.

"By the stones... I'll be damned. Orin, Pula! Ye daft bastards, what're ye doin' here?"

"Rescuin' your arse, looks like," Orin said, lowering his hammer and stepping forward with a snort.

"You didn't think we'd let you guard relics of our fathers alone, did ye?" Pula added, grinning.

Gili pushed himself to his feet, favoring his wounded leg slightly.

"Glad to see ye," he said gruffly, clapping them both on the shoulders. "Damn glad."

The three dwarves exchanged a look—an unspoken oath of stone and blood—and without another word, they set up a proper watch.

Pula stood facing one passage, bow ready. Orin watched another, hammer in hand. Gili remained at the center, lantern burning low, sword laid across his lap once more.

In the cold, damp silence of the catacombs, surrounded by shadows and echoes of the past, they stood firm.

Dwarves against the darkness.

Birchgrove's finest.

The next night in the catacombs was darker than usual, the heavy, damp air sticking to their skin, and the only sound was the occasional drip of water from the vaulted stone ceiling. Gili, Orin, and Pula sat quietly, weapons near at hand, muscles tense as bowstrings.

A sound came — soft at first, but growing louder.

Footsteps. Not one, not two, but many. Mixed sounds: boots scraping, armored plates clinking, low muttering voices carried on the cold air.

Gili jerked upright, knocking ash from his pipe.

"Steel in hand, lads," he said in a low growl, grabbing his sword and setting his feet wide.

They fanned out, ready.

The shadows came first — tall, broad-shouldered men, six of them, heavily armed, swords, axes, and crude shields glinting in the lantern light. They stopped just outside of sword reach, faces hidden beneath battered helms.

One stepped forward, the leader, his voice rough and full of disdain.

"You lot ain't supposed to be here. Move aside and you'll walk out alive."

Gili spat on the ground between them.

"To hell with you shit-munchin' bastards!" he roared, lifting his sword high.

The fight exploded like a powder keg.

Steel crashed against steel, echoes booming through the catacombs.

Gili threw himself into the thick of it, sword flashing. His first strike hacked clean through a man's thigh, sending him sprawling to the stones with a scream, blood gushing in thick streams.

Orin swung his hammer in brutal arcs, crushing a skull with a sickening crunch and sending another man reeling with broken ribs.

Pula, nimble as a wolf, darted behind one attacker and buried his short sword deep into his back, twisting cruelly before pulling it free.

One of the mercenaries charged Gili, a long axe swinging low. Gili sidestepped and, with a roar, hacked the man's head clean off in one powerful arc. The body stumbled forward a few steps before collapsing.

Another tried to run. Pula's arrow found his spine mid-stride, pinning him to the ground like a broken doll.

The last fighter raised his sword in surrender, trembling — but Orin, seeing the blood of his kin already spilled, swung his hammer low and shattered the man's knee, then drove the heavy weapon into his chest with a savage grunt.

The tunnel fell silent but for the panting breaths of the dwarves and the slow drip-drip of blood pooling on the stones.

Gili wiped his blade on a fallen man's cloak.

"Bastards picked the wrong hole to die in," he muttered.

Breathing heavily, they turned toward the vault door.

"Best make sure nothin's been touched," Orin said grimly.

Gili nodded, and they heaved the iron door open.

Inside, the relics glimmered in the lantern light, untouched — or so it seemed.

But before they could step inside, a strange chanting filled the air.

A figure appeared from the shadows — a dwarf, clad in ancient grey robes. His eyes gleamed with unnatural light as he raised his hands and muttered words of power.



Before any of them could react, tendrils of unseen force wrapped around their legs, rooting them to the ground.

"Stone-bind!" Gili cursed, straining to move, but it was like being shackled in iron.

The robed dwarf — a monk of some dark order, surely — darted into the vault. Quick as a snake, he stuffed jeweled rings, the ancient shield, and the priceless war-banner into a leather sack.

"Stop, ye thievin' rat!" Orin bellowed, struggling against the magical bonds.

With a sly grin, the monk turned and fled into the dark tunnels, the treasures slung over his back.

Pula was the first to break free, tearing the sticky magical bindings with a snarl. Gili and Orin ripped free soon after, cursing and drawing steel.

"After 'im!" Gili roared, sprinting into the blackness.

They raced through the winding catacombs, lantern swinging wildly, their boots hammering the ancient stones.

Ahead, the flicker of the monk's torch bobbed and wove through side passages.



"Cut the bastard off!" Orin shouted, veering left.

"No—straight ahead!" Pula barked, nocking an arrow even as he ran.

"By the gods," Gili growled between heavy breaths, "he's fast for an old goat!"

They thundered through low arches, past forgotten tombs and cracked statues, the smell of mold and dust thick in the air. At every turn, the glint of stolen gold egged them onward, their blood boiling with rage and duty.

Somewhere ahead, the monk laughed — a dry, cold sound — and disappeared into deeper shadows.

But the dwarves of Birchgrove would not be outrun. Not tonight.

Gili, Orin, and Pula hurtled down the left tunnel, boots hammering the damp stone floor, hearts pounding in their ears. The faint glow of the dwarf monk's torch bobbed ahead, just out of reach.

Suddenly, Orin, cursing, stumbled on a loose rock and slammed hard into the ground, his hammer skittering out of reach.

"Bloody stones!" Orin growled, pushing himself up.

Before Gili or Pula could help him, a thick, wet sound echoed from above.

A spider — massive, hairy, and gray as smoke — descended from the ceiling, strands of sticky silk firing from its mouth, trapping Orin's arms and pinning Pula's legs to the floor. Gili roared and slashed with his sword, hacking the strands from his body before they hardened fully.

The spider lunged, mandibles clicking, dripping venom. Gili met it head-on, jamming the point of his sword through its eye, black ichor spurting out in a foul spray. The beast thrashed, legs beating the stone, until it collapsed with a final, sickening squelch.

"Move!" Gili barked, slicing the webs off Pula and dragging Orin to his feet.

They didn't waste a breath. They ran hard, the distant chanting growing louder with every stride.

Finally, they burst into a wide, torch-lit chamber. Ancient stone pillars lined the room, cracked and worn by centuries. In the center stood a low stone altar, black with age, and around it six robed figures chanted in a deep, droning tongue, their voices vibrating the air.

Atop the altar lay one of the sacred relics — a battered shield, marked with the crest of an ancient dwarven hero.

The dwarf monk stood beside them, arms raised high, his gray beard gleaming in torchlight. His voice cut through the chanting.

"The relics belong to us now! Forgotten by your weak kin, abandoned to rot!"

Gili stepped forward, rage burning in his chest.

"Stop desecratin' the relics of our forefathers, ye traitorous worm!" he bellowed, sword raised high.

The chanting rose to a fever pitch. Dark tendrils of smoke seeped from the floor, thick and oily, coiling around their ankles.

Before Gili could charge, the monk muttered an incantation, and once again the dwarves were yanked to the stone floor, legs locked by unseen force.

"Again with this cursed spell!" Orin roared, struggling.

The robed figures moved in, knives glinting in the flickering torchlight. The monk circled the altar, chanting more spells, weaving a net of shadows in the air.

Pula managed to wrench free first, loosing an arrow into the gut of one of the chanting figures. The man crumpled, the chant faltering.

Gili, teeth bared, slammed his sword hilt into the stone to break the binding magic, roaring with effort. He sprang up just as a robed figure lunged — only to be met with a brutal slash that nearly cut him in two.

The monk hissed and bound them again — a third time — locking their feet mid-fight.

Pula hurled a dagger across the chamber, burying it deep in the monk's shoulder, and the spell shattered.

Orin, bleeding from a slash to his arm, swung his hammer in a wide arc, catching two robed figures at once and smashing them to the ground.

Gili faced the monk head-on, their blades clashing in a furious dance. The monk spat curses and tried to cast another binding, but Gili kicked him square in the gut, sending him sprawling.

"That's for dishonoring the blood of our fathers!" Gili snarled.

With a final roar, Gili drove his sword through the monk's chest. The old dwarf gasped once, blood frothing his lips, and slumped dead over the altar.

The rest of the robed figures fell quickly, the room falling silent but for the labored breathing of the three battered dwarves.

Their bodies bore deep gashes, bruises blossoming purple and black, blood dripping onto the ancient stones.

Gili staggered to the altar and gathered the shield and the stolen rings, stuffing them into a sack. Pula and Orin collected the scattered relics from the floor.

"We can't leave them here," Gili rasped, wiping blood from his eyes. "Not now. Too many bastards know they exist."

Orin nodded grimly, holding his side where blood seeped between his fingers.

"Agreed. We take the whole lot back."

"Even if we bleed all the way home," Pula added, a grim smile on his face.

With great care, they made their way back to the main relic vault. Gili, limping heavily, opened the great iron door again.

Inside, the rest of the relics still gleamed under the dim light: ancient axes, jeweled circlets, sacred war banners. They packed everything they could carry into sacks and crates.

Each dwarf bore heavy burdens on his back — not just the weight of the relics, but the honor of their ancestors.

As they trudged up the stone steps toward the surface, battered and bruised but victorious, Gili muttered around his battered pipe.

"No matter what comes... we don't let these be forgotten."

"Aye," Orin said quietly. "Stone endures."

"And so do we," Pula added.

The battered, bloodied dwarves made their way slowly up the winding streets of Helm City, the heavy sacks of relics dragging at their shoulders, but they held their heads high. Gili led them toward Elira's manor, the banner wrapped tightly in cloth and cradled in his arms as if it were a living thing.

When they reached the gate, the guards, seeing their grim faces and bloody clothes, stepped aside without a word. A servant swung open the manor door, and Elira herself met them in the entryway, eyes widening as she saw the state they were in.

"By the gods," she breathed. "You did it."

"Aye," Gili grunted, staggering inside. "But it weren't pretty."

Elira ushered them into a warm room lit by a roaring hearth. Heavy oak chairs sat around a table already laid with bread, cheese, and pitchers of wine and water. She urged them to sit, and they did, groaning as their wounds tugged and ached.

"You saved more than you know," Elira said, pouring a goblet of wine for each of them. "Each piece you brought back... it's part of something greater."

She motioned to the cloth-wrapped banner. Gili unwrapped it carefully, revealing the faded, battle-torn standard beneath: deep green cloth, stitched with a silver hammer crossed over a mountain.

"That," Elira said, voice reverent, "is the Banner of Durak Strongstone."

The dwarves leaned closer, their bruised faces solemn.

"Durak was a dwarven king in the elder days," Elira continued. "He led his people across the broken mountains after their home fell to fire and darkness. This banner flew at every battle, at every stand. When he finally carved out a new home, he planted this banner in the stone and swore an oath to never again be driven from his land."

Gili ran a rough hand over the cloth, as if feeling the old strength still woven into it.

"That oath is ours now," he said quietly.

Elira nodded.

"But the city is no longer safe," she said. "If word spreads, others will come. Worse than those you fought. These relics must vanish from sight."

She leaned forward, her voice low.

"They must go to Birchgrove. Hidden, protected, by those who still honor them."

Orin chuckled hoarsely, shaking his head.

"Ye want to turn our village into a bloody vault, eh?"

"No vault," Elira said with a sly smile. "A sanctuary."

She turned to one of her guards standing near the door.

"Fetch a wagon and two strong horses. And make sure no one follows."

The guard saluted and hurried off.

By evening, the wagon was ready—a sturdy, covered cart drawn by two thick-chested black horses. Lanterns were carefully covered, and the relics packed with straw and cloth to cushion them for the journey.

They worked swiftly, loading each relic with reverence and care. Gili hefted the heavy chests of gold and silver items, Orin packed the ancient axes and shields, and Pula tucked the banner into a chest lined with wool.

As they tightened the last ropes, Elira approached Gili.

"You have my trust, Gili. And my gratitude."

Gili grunted, looking awkward as he scratched his beard.

"Just doin' what's right."

"You'll do more than that," Elira said. "You'll give them a new home."

They climbed aboard. Orin took the reins, squinting into the darkness beyond the gate.

"Let's get these beauties home," he muttered.

The wagon creaked into motion, wheels clattering softly over the cobblestones. They wound their way through the narrow back streets of Helm City, keeping to the shadows, avoiding the main squares and guard posts.

The city seemed to hold its breath as they passed.

"I feel like a rat sneakin' out of a cat's pantry," Pula whispered, eyes darting around.

"Better a live rat than a dead hero," Orin grunted, flicking the reins.

Behind them, the city's walls faded into the darkness. Ahead, the long road to Birchgrove stretched open under a sliver of moon.

Gili, sitting at the back of the wagon with his sword across his lap, looked once at the wrapped relics, then out into the night.

"No matter what's out there," he muttered to himself, "they won't have 'em. Not while I draw breath."

And with that, the hidden caravan rolled on into the wilds, carrying the hope of a people long forgotten.

The wagon creaked and swayed as Orin urged the horses through the muddy, rutted road, the wheels slipping and groaning with each turn. The moon hung low, thin and pale, casting eerie shadows over the dense, dark forest closing in on either side of the road. The only sounds were the clop of hooves and the low murmur of the wheels fighting the muck.

Then—distant at first, but growing fast—came the thunder of galloping hooves.

Pula's head snapped up, bow already in hand.

"You hear that?" he hissed.

Gili rose to his feet at the back of the wagon, sword drawn, his eyes narrowing as shapes formed in the distance. Black figures, cloaked and armored, the moonlight flashing off chainmail and polished helms. Nine riders in black, each bearing a cloak stitched with a silver dragon sigil, bore down upon them at full tilt.

"They're comin' fast!" Orin barked, yanking on the reins to push the horses harder.

The riders closed in, weapons drawn — swords, axes, long knives gleaming cold in the night.

The first of them leapt from his horse onto the back of the wagon with a clatter of steel. Gili met him with a roar, sword flashing. They clashed fiercely, blades ringing out sharp and

savage. Gili caught a glimpse of more riders flanking them, one already reaching for a torch soaked in pitch.

Another black-cloaked figure leapt onto the side of the wagon, grabbing the frame and hauling himself up. Gili, in the thick of his duel, ducked a wild swing and hacked downward, slicing the man's fingers from the frame. The rider screamed and fell under the wagon's wheels with a wet crunch, his helmet bouncing free into the mud.

The wagon swerved violently as another rider tried to force them off the road. Orin, with a savage yell, released the reins with one hand and swung his hammer wildly, catching the rider across the temple. The man toppled from his saddle and tumbled beneath the wagon, his skull crushed beneath the heavy wheels with a sickening crunch.

On the other side, Gili fought like a cornered bear. A rider surged close, slashing at Gili's side. The dwarf ducked low, hanging off the edge of the wagon by one arm. As the rider passed, Gili swung his sword with brutal precision, hacking the horse's foreleg clean off at the knee. The beast screamed and collapsed, throwing the rider headlong into the mud, where horse and man thrashed in a broken heap.

"Cursed dogs!" Gili spat, hauling himself back onto the wagon bed.

Pula, nimble and deadly, loosed arrow after arrow, each finding flesh. One arrow punched through the eye slit of a rider's helm, dropping him like a stone.

But in the chaos, one of the attackers hurled his burning torch onto the wagon. It struck the canvas cover, and flames licked hungrily at the dry cloth.

"Fire!" Pula shouted, dropping his bow and grabbing a water skin.

Another rider clambered onto the wagon, torch in hand. He swung wildly, his cloak catching flame, and within seconds he was a screaming torch himself. The flaming rider flailed madly, setting part of the wagon alight before he finally leapt off, shrieking in agony as he rolled into the mud.

Pula scrambled over the barrels and crates, beating at the flames with a wet cloak, finally dousing the worst of it.

Meanwhile, Gili fought another attacker toe to toe, blades flashing in the smoky air. With a savage thrust, Gili drove his sword into the man's throat, ripping it free with a spray of blood. The man toppled backwards off the wagon, thudding hard onto the road.

Orin, breathing like a war-forged furnace, cursed and spat as he whipped the horses harder, trying to outrun the last of the attackers.

"Come on, ye lazy nags! Move yer fat arses!"

The remaining riders, seeing the fierce defense and the chaos wrought among their own, finally peeled away, vanishing into the trees with curses and shouts.

For a long few moments, only the sound of the horses' hooves and the creaking wagon filled the air.

Gili slumped against the side of the wagon, bloodied but alive, panting heavily.

"That... was a proper welcome," he muttered darkly.

Pula, still beating at a few stubborn embers, spat into the road.

"I'd say we made a few enemies tonight."

Orin laughed, a harsh bark of sound as he wiped blood from his brow with the back of his hand.

"They'll think twice before chasin' dwarves on a wagon again, that's for sure."

They pressed on into the night, battered, bruised, but victorious, the sacred relics rattling behind them as they rolled through the shadowed woods toward Birchgrove—and whatever else fate had yet to throw their way.

The party rolled into Birchgrove in the black depths of the night, the battered wagon creaking under its precious load. The village slept under a heavy blanket of mist, lanterns dark, houses still. Only the low moan of the wind greeted them as they pulled to a stop near the Grumpy Boar tavern.

Gili leapt down from the wagon, sword still sheathed but close at hand.

"Get 'em unloaded, fast," he muttered, his voice low and urgent.

They worked quickly, dragging the heavy sacks and crates down from the wagon. The relics clinked faintly under their wrappings, but no light flickered in any window, and no curious eyes peered out. Still, Gili's skin crawled.

They carried the relics to their homes in silence. In Gili's house, he dumped the treasure onto his rough kitchen table and grabbed his old pack from a peg on the wall. Pula and Orin did the same in their own homes. One by one, they carefully stuffed the relics into sturdy backpacks — the banner wrapped in oilcloth, the shields and weapons wrapped in thick wool to mute their noise.

As Gili cinched his pack tight, he spoke in a low, gruff voice.

"Keepin' 'em here's no good. If those riders followed us, they'll tear Birchgrove apart to find 'em."

Pula tightened the strap on his pack and nodded grimly.

"So what do we do? Hide 'em?"

"Aye," Gili said, shouldering his heavy burden. "We take 'em to the mountains. Around the ancient shrine we fixed — no one goes there but us."

They regrouped near the edge of the village, bringing only one torch to light their path. The orange glow flickered against their grim faces as they set out, following the river's silver thread upstream into the foothills.

The trek was slow, the weight of the relics dragging at their backs. The cold bit into their skin, and the ground grew steeper, more treacherous with every step.

For hours they pressed on, leaving Birchgrove far behind. The river's gentle murmur kept them company, a soft sound under the heavy night.

Finally, Gili raised a hand, signaling a stop.

"We're close," he said. "Cross here."

The river was shallow at this point, but wide — and colder than death. They waded in, water slapping at their thighs, boots slipping on moss-slick stones.

Halfway across, the water grew oddly still. Too still.

Pula was the first to notice.

"Something's wrong," he hissed.

Before he could finish, a pale, rotted hand shot from the water and clamped onto his leg, dragging hard.

Four shapes surged up from the riverbed — sodden corpses of drowned travelers, their skin gray-blue, eyes hollow and weeping brackish water.

The Drowned Dead.

Gili roared and swung his sword in a wide arc, severing the arm clinging to Pula. But another corpse lunged at Orin, grabbing his waist and dragging him downward. Orin grunted, smashing it with his hammer, but the creature's cold touch drained the strength from his limbs — he staggered back, face pale.

Another Drowned Dead grabbed Gili around the chest, water streaming from its mouth as it hissed in his ear. The cold was unbearable, numbing his arms, leeching his strength. He wrestled free with a grunt, driving his sword through its chest. It let out a gurgling moan and sank back into the black water.

Pula, still staggering from the first attack, drew his dagger and stabbed wildly, puncturing a dead man's eye socket. The thing spasmed and floated limp.

Orin slammed his hammer down onto the last Drowned Dead, cracking its sodden skull with a wet, sickening crunch.

Breathing hard, the three dwarves stumbled out of the water, dripping and shivering, but alive.



Gili looked back at the river, sword still raised.

"By the stones," he muttered. "The dead don't even sleep easy here."

"Nor will we," Orin growled, wiping slime from his beard.

"We keep movin'," Gili said, hefting his pack once more. "We're close. Just a bit further, lads."

Without another word, they turned from the cursed river and pushed deeper into the mountain woods, the flickering torchlight barely holding back the darkness clawing at their backs.

The journey deeper into the mountains stretched into the dead hours of night, the world around them cloaked in silence except for the crunch of their boots against loose stone and the distant sigh of the river. Cold mist curled between gnarled roots and ancient boulders, and the twisted pine trees loomed like dark, silent sentinels above their heads. Every now and then, a nightbird called out, lonely and sharp, or a branch snapped in the deep woods, but the dwarves pressed on, grim and determined.

The path grew narrower, barely a game trail now, winding between steep cliffs and patches of wild thorn bushes. The mountain air was thin and sharp, biting their lungs with every breath. Their torch sputtered weakly, casting long, lurching shadows on the moss-covered rocks and broken tree stumps.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, they climbed a low ridge and found themselves looking down at the ancient shrine.

It stood in a clearing wreathed in mist: a circle of crumbling stone pillars around a wide flat altar, all weather-worn and covered in green lichen. The shrine seemed almost to breathe with the mountain itself, heavy with the weight of countless forgotten years.

Gili let out a breath.

"Here we are, lads."

Without wasting a moment, they set to work, digging with small shovels and their own calloused hands. They carved a deep pit behind the altar, carefully laying the relics inside, each one wrapped in thick cloth and oilskin.

The old banner of Durak Strongstone was placed on top, Gili smoothing it down with almost reverent hands.

As they finished covering the last of the treasure with earth and stones, a deep, low hum filled the clearing, and the air grew colder still.

Mist curled unnaturally around the altar, thickening, until a figure slowly took shape before them.

It was a dwarf — but not of any living kind. A ghost, pale and shimmering, clad in ancient mail and a tattered cloak, a crown of worn stone resting on his brow. His eyes glowed faintly like the embers of a dying fire.



The three dwarves froze, hands instinctively going to their weapons, but the ghost lifted a gauntleted hand in peace.

"The relics of the ancients have returned," the ghost said, his voice deep as the mountain roots, layered with sadness and pride.

They stood in awe as the spirit stepped closer.

"I am King Brumdir Stonehelm," he said, placing a hand over his chest. "In life, I swore to guard the treasures of my people. You have brought them back to their rightful bed."

Gili stepped forward, bowing his head deeply, Orin and Pula doing the same.

"We only did what honor demanded, Your Majesty," Gili said gruffly.

The king's ghost smiled, a slow, heavy thing.

"Each relic you returned has a tale," he said.

He gestured toward the ground.

"The Shield of Valrik — once held against the armies of the Deep Orcs in the Siege of Irondeep. It never broke."

"The Rings of the Seven Fathers — worn by the first seven kings of the mountain clans, each a symbol of unity and strength."

"The Banner of Strongstone — carried across the broken lands to carve new homes from wilderness and despair."

"And the Axe of Morgrim — the blade that slew the Red Wyrms of Hollow Peak."

The dwarves listened, silent, drinking in the ancient history.

"You are true sons of the mountain," King Brumdir said, his form beginning to shimmer and fade. "Let the mountains guard in peace."

He extended one hand, and from the mist formed a ring — wrought of black iron shot through with veins of gold, runes etched along its band. He floated it forward until it hovered before Gili.

"This is the Ring of the Earth Oath," Brumdir said. "It shall grant strength when standing upon stone, and the earth itself shall lend you its might."

Gili reached out with a reverent hand and took the ring, feeling its ancient power thrum against his skin.

"Thank ye, Your Majesty," Gili said, voice thick.

"Guard it well," the king said, fading like mist before the rising sun. "And guard each other."

The mist dissolved, the clearing falling silent once more, but a lingering sense of peace filled the air.

The three dwarves stood for a long moment in silence, then Orin clapped Gili on the back.

"Well, lad," Orin grinned. "That was somethin' you don't see every day."

Pula chuckled, adjusting his pack. "You think this means we'll finally get a break?"

Gili slid the ring onto his finger, feeling a surge of strength in his battered arms.

"Not likely," he said, lighting his pipe with a spark. "But at least now... the mountains stand with us."

And with that, they turned back toward the long road home, the hidden relics safe beneath the ancient stones, and the ghost of a king watching over them.

The battered and bruised dwarves finally returned to Birchgrove as the first gray hints of dawn crept over the eastern hills. Their legs were leaden, their bodies aching with every step, but their hearts were steady, lighter than they'd been in weeks. Without a word spoken between them, they each made their way to their homes, boots dragging through the dirt paths, doors creaking quietly open.

Gili collapsed onto his bed beside Sif, not even bothering to remove his boots. Sif stirred, murmuring sleepily and draping an arm over his chest. Within moments, Gili was snoring like a sawmill.

The next day passed in a haze of deep, dreamless sleep. It wasn't until afternoon, when the sun was high and the village was humming with work again, that the pounding of hooves jolted Birchgrove awake.

A courier rode into the center of the village, dust trailing behind him like a comet's tail. He dismounted swiftly, a leather pouch slung over his shoulder. Without delay, he strode straight to Gili's door and rapped loudly.

Gili, wiping sleep from his eyes and yawning like a bear, opened the door. The courier, a lean lad in simple armor, handed over a wax-sealed parchment bearing the crest of Princess Elira.

"For Gili of Birchgrove," he said formally, then turned on his heel and rode off without another word.

Gili grunted, broke the seal, and unrolled the parchment. His eyes moved slowly across the words, and a slow grin spread across his face.

He stepped out onto his front stoop and called out loudly enough for half the village to hear.

"Gather round, ye hard-workin' lot! Got a message from the Princess herself!"

The villagers dropped their work tools and hurried over, wiping hands on tunics and aprons, faces expectant.

Gili cleared his throat and read aloud in a booming voice:

*"By decree of Princess Elira of Helm City, for your valor, loyalty, and unyielding defense of ancient relics vital to our shared history, Gili of Birchgrove is henceforth named Warden of Birchgrove. Furthermore, let it be known that Birchgrove is recognized as a protected settlement under the favor of Helm City, and is relieved of all taxation henceforth and forevermore, in honor of its service and the blood it has spilled."*

There was a heartbeat of stunned silence — then a thunderous cheer erupted.

Axes and hammers were lifted high, hats were thrown into the air. Even old Kendric whooped loud enough to scare the birds from the rooftops.

"Finally!" Orin bellowed, thumping Gili hard on the back. "Proper recognition for proper folk!"

"Drinks at the Grumpy Boar tonight!" shouted Pula, grinning ear to ear.

The village bustled anew with a strange vigor that day, a pride under their boots. Some men marched off into the forest to cut wood, singing working songs loud enough to shake the branches. Others mended nets and set off for the river to fish, their laughter echoing across

the water. Women tended to the gardens and animals, feeding pigs and chickens, milking cows and goats, and weaving new cloth from fresh-washed wool.

At the forge, Orin hammered away with even more fire than usual, shaping scythe blades and horseshoes with booming strikes that rang through the valley. At the mill, flour dust rose like a cloud as Bruni and two halflings worked the grinding stones with busy hands.

Even the children played harder, running through the streets with wooden swords, pretending to be heroes guarding ancient treasures.

As the sun dipped low and the sky flushed red and gold, the village began to quiet. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys, the smell of roasting meat and baking bread thick in the warm evening air.

Gili sat on the worn bench in front of his house, Sif nestled close beside him, their child asleep on her lap. Gili puffed lazily at his pipe, dark ale cradled in his hand, a broad and satisfied grin hidden beneath his black beard.

He gazed over Birchgrove — their Birchgrove — and let out a deep, rumbling sigh of pure contentment.

"Aye," he said softly to Sif, "we built somethin' good here."

And as the stars blinked to life overhead, and the peaceful hum of village life wrapped around them like a warm blanket, Gili knew deep in his bones that Birchgrove would endure — strong as the mountains themselves.